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Spencer Brunton.

"CORINNA"

"CORINNA"

A Study

By "RITA"

AUTHOR OF "DAME DUREDEN," "MY LORD CONCEIT,"
"TWO BAD BLUE EYES," ETC. ETC.

In Three Volumes

VOL. II.

LONDON

JOHN & ROBERT MAXWELL

MILTON HOUSE, SHOE LANE, FLEET STREET

AND

35, ST. BRIDE STREET, LUDGATE CIRCUS, E.C.

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"CORINNA."

CHAPTER I.

"RIVALS."

THE two men stood and looked at each other in the dull lamp-light. In Fedoroff's mind a sense of indignation and surprise mingled.

"I am at your service," he said, coldly.

"You have come from Mademoiselle D'Avisgnes' rooms at this hour," said Brandon, hoarsely. "You have been there since ten o'clock. By what right?"

"By what right?" echoed Loris. "*Par*

Dieu, Monsieur, I might ask by what right *you* play the spy on my actions."

"I am in no mood for trifling or evasions," muttered the Englishman. "I ask you by right of the interest any honest-minded man takes in a woman who is innocent, and alone, and—unprotected."

"And I answer you that if a woman who is innocent, and alone, and unprotected, chooses to receive a man even at so unconventional an hour, it has nothing to do with any one but herself and—that man."

"You are mistaken," said Brandon, savagely. "Mademoiselle D'Avisgnes is unconventional, I allow, but she is not likely to play fast and loose with her reputation. If you can assure me that you went there at her request—that you have a right——"

"Nonsense!" interrupted Loris, coldly.

"With every allowance for the eccentricities of your nation, permit me to say that I object to being catechised in this fashion. Neither Mademoiselle D'Avisgnes, nor myself, are responsible to you for our actions. Good evening."

"Stay," cried Brandon, seizing his arm. "As there is a heaven above, you *shall* answer me. Are you going to marry Mademoiselle D'Avisgnes?"

For a moment Loris grew deadly pale. He hesitated. Then he looked at his rival's face, and a little chill smile crept to his lips.

"I decline to answer that question," he said.

Brandon loosed his hold; his eyes blazed. A fire of passionate indignation glowed in his heart.

"You are—not—going to marry her;

and you are alone with her at this hour —and she permits it?"

"As you see," murmured Loris, indifferently.

"Have you no thought for her—no shame at thus compromising a young and unprotected woman?" cried Brandon, hotly. "Let me tell you that I consider your conduct infamous—unworthy of a gentleman."

"My friend," interposed Loris, calmly, "you are excited, and you are talking rashly. I simply went to pay Mademoiselle D'Avisgnes a farewell call, because to-morrow — or rather to-day — I leave Rome. I found her overwhelmed with work. I was fortunate enough to render her some assistance. We scarcely noticed the passage of time. That is the whole account of my evening. Perhaps," he added with

a sneer, "even *you*, Monsieur, had you been in my place, might also have been oblivious of time while in society so charming."

That sneer set Brandon's blood on fire. He had looked upon this man with suspicion—he saw in him a rival, and a successful rival. A lurid light seemed thrown around his image of Corinna; that beautiful, spotless creation he had idealised was defiled by this night's work; never again could she be what he had imagined, and the knowledge seemed to rouse in him the savage and brutal instinct that lies at the root of all jealousy. With difficulty he restrained himself from laying this man at his feet. His hand clenched, he set his teeth as if to chain back the fiery torrent of words that boiled in his brain.

"I will not affect to misunderstand you," he said; "but, right or no right, I constitute myself the avenger of any wrong or insult shown to this lady. She is young—she is unprotected—and you have compromised her in the sight of the world, for do not fancy I am the only one who knows of your visit to-night, and its duration. If you have a spark of honour in your nature you can shield her from the consequences of her own imprudence. As a gentleman, I see no course but one open to you. That you love her, I have little doubt; your whole conduct since you met her has declared that. It should, therefore, need no other teaching to show you the right, the only way in which you can protect her honour; and as I live, you shall do that in the face of the

world, or answer for your cowardice to me."

There was a moment's silence.

Fedoroff was no coward, but he resented the interference and dictation of a man he had long recognised as a rival, and a superior to himself.

Silence sometimes has a terrible eloquence. It was full of memories, emotions, and struggling passions to these two men facing each other under the cold gray of the Roman sky. To Loris Fedoroff it brought keen pain as well as humiliation—the more so because honour was not wholly dead within him, and Love, for the first time in his life, had come to his soul in a purer, nobler guise than ever it had worn.

Corinna was no woman to be sought and forsaken, and she loved him so utterly, so unselfishly, that she had shielded his

life at the risk of all most dear to a woman. And yet, marriage——

Brandon's voice cut short his thoughts. "Your answer," he said, hoarsely.

Loris started. The blood flushed his brow. He would rather have laid this man dead at his feet than confess he had conquered. But he knew there was but one course left open to him.

"Monsieur," he said, coldly, "although I decline to acknowledge your right to interfere with my actions, I yet honour the feelings that prompt such interference. Mademoiselle D'Avisgnes' name is as dear to me as to yourself. It shall not suffer for this night's imprudence, rest assured."

Brandon drew a deep breath. "She —she loves you then?" he said, faintly.

"She does me that honour," answered Fedoroff.

"Then—then why did you deny——"

"Ah, *par Dieu*, Monsieur," exclaimed the Russian impatiently. "One does not care to be arraigned like a thief so suddenly, and I have not yet asked the lady the question you wished me to answer."

"But you will. You give me your word of honour?"

Loris bowed. "I give you my—word—of—honour," he slowly repeated.

Perhaps it was as well no action of his past found voice at that moment, to tell how lightly he had held that bond, or might still hold it.

CHAPTER II.

WHAT LOVE DOES TO A WOMAN.

CORINNA'S whole nature — her whole life, seemed changed now. A restlessness possessed her that no effort of will could combat. Her work lay neglected, for work meant only dreams of one who had mastered her heart and filled its every thought. All her own gifts, talents, powers, her very identity, seemed merged into one feeling. She was only a woman who loved.

This love made all the music of her life, setting all its incidents, longings,

desires, to one strain of triumphant thanksgiving, making her glad and proud beyond all words.

When a man is great, love is to him of less account than fame. When a woman has fame, it looks of no worth or account beside love. To her it is indeed no "thing apart," but her very soul—heart—breath—existence!

It was so to Corinna.

All the previous isolation of her life, all the placid, half-frozen currents of her nature were now thawed and set free in their channels, and as a river takes its course towards the sea, so that current set itself with all its unchained force and eagerness, to the sea of her lover's life.

For several days after he left her she shut herself up in her rooms, going nowhere, seeing no one, denying herself even

to Madame Nina. It seemed to her that any other voice or presence would jar upon this deep content, this soft, sweet happiness that wrapped her in a mantle of tender dreams.

The little Countess fumed and wondered. Then suddenly she caught a whisper here and there; a hint of something odd, queer, inexplicable. Those smiles, and sneers, and hints, with which Society damns its victims; those innuendoes blown like thistledown by the breath of scandal—some of these things reached her ears, and coupled the names of Loris Fedoroff and Corinna.

Madame Nina listened, questioned, raged. Then she flew off straight to her friend, determined now to take no denial. It was a cold, wet day. Corinna was sure to be in.

"Tell Mademoiselle D'Avisgnes I *must* see her; it is imperative," she said to the porter, who gave his usual answer to her request for admission, and startled by her peremptory tone the man sent the message.

The answer came back speedily.

"Madame was to be admitted," and Madame took her way to the frescoed chamber, looking like a little angry bird, her plumage all ruffled by the wind and the rain, a fire of indignation in her bright dark eyes.

"No; don't speak to me," she cried, as Corinna rose to greet her. "It is abominable—it is unfriendly to treat me like this. What has come to you; and do you know what every one is saying? Such things as I have heard—but there, it is so like you. You shut yourself up,

and don't care though the whole world is making free with your name! Of course, I don't believe it, and it is all infamous and intolerable; but still, there it is, and gossip doesn't lose by repetition, and you sitting here like one of those saints in the illuminated missals. Really, you are the most provoking of women!"

"But, my dear Nina," cried Corinna, as the little Countess paused from sheer want of breath, "what has happened? what has put you out?"

"Put me out!" echoed Madame Nina. "I should think I was put out. Do you know what every one in Rome is saying?"

"Every one, as represented by the select *coterie* of Madame la Comtesse Floralia," smiled Corinna. "I confess I do not. I suppose you have come to tell me?"

"Yes, and a pleasant thing it is to tell

one's friend," exclaimed Madame Nina, indignantly. "They say that on the night of the Embassy ball Loris Fedoroff was not present because he spent the evening here with you. A pretty scandal! I always told you, Corinna, that if you would isolate yourself, and give the cold shoulder to society, it would be the worse for you. They are only too glad to tear you to pieces at the first opportunity. Of course I denied it the moment I heard it, and came straight off to tell you, knowing how indignant you would be; but, deny it as you may, you can't make people disbelieve a scandal once received. To credit it—oh, that is easy enough, only too easy; but the other——"

She stopped abruptly. She was looking at Corinna's face. It was very pale, but there was in it none of the indignation

she expected. "You take it very calmly," she said.

"How have they heard?" asked Corinna in a low voice. She did not look up. Her right hand was idly tracing lines on the paper before her. Madame Nina had, as usual, interrupted her writing.

"*How!*" cried the little Countess. "You do not mean to say that it was not an invention—that there *was* something to hear?"

"It is quite true that Monsieur Fedoroff was here the night of the Embassy ball," said Corinna, a deep flush mounting slowly to her face. "He was leaving Rome next day; he came to bid me farewell."

"And you received him—*here*, at night —*alone*?" cried Madame Nina, in italicised accents of horror.

"Why not?" asked Corinna, calmly.

"Was I to send off for chaperons to play propriety because a friend chanced to call at a somewhat unconventional hour?"

"Well!" ejaculated Madame Nina, gazing at her with wide-open eyes, "you really are the most extraordinary woman it has ever been my lot to meet. Living by yourself—receiving gentlemen at midnight—why, what can you expect but that every one will talk?"

"It is a matter of perfect indifference to me if they do talk," answered Corinna.

The flush was still on her cheeks—her eyes were humid—her mind was full of memories of that night when her lover had held her to his heart.

"But it should not be a matter of indifference," cried the Countess. "You are a woman, and you ought to value

your reputation as — as other women do. The idea of receiving Fedoroff—at night — alone. Now, if it had been Brandon——"

Corinna laughed. "*Ma chère,*" she said, "your arguments are always unique. If my conduct was wrong the fact remains. But it appears that my error was not in receiving a man at such an hour, but one particular man."

"Precisely," said Madame Nina. "Every one knows what Fedoroff is. It is his nature to make love to every woman he meets; and he has compromised scores. I am sorry you are added to the list."

Corinna raised her head and looked at her.

"Nina," she said, "whatever may be Monsieur Fedoroff's faults, I cannot listen

to them from the lips of idle gossips. I have told you he is my—friend. I consider it disloyal to heed the slanders that are busy with his name. As to what the people say of me, I am indifferent. You, at least, should be able to judge of me as I am. Do you think the worse of me for what I have told you?"

"I? No," cried the little Countess, warmly. "But, my dear, why have you been so imprudent? And Loris, too. He at least knows the world."

"There are times, Nina, when the world and its considerations look very poor and paltry. I have never guided my actions by its principles, or cared for its verdict. I am not going to begin to do so now."

Madame Nina shrugged her pretty shoulders. "But at least you will confide

in me. Loris, you say, is your friend. But, my dear, friendship between a young and beautiful woman, and a man like Fedoroff, is a dangerous fiction. He has been like your shadow since you came to Rome, and—— Why, is that not his dog lying by the fire?"

"Yes," smiled Corinna, "I am taking care of it during his absence."

"Another proof of friendship, I suppose. Well, considering that I knew Loris years before you did, he might have asked me."

"But, dear Nina, you know you hate dogs."

"I know that you are keeping something from me, and it is very unkind of you," murmured the little Countess, plaintively. "Does Loris love you—is he going to marry you?"

Again that bright flush stained the beautiful white-rose skin. Corinna's eyes drooped.

"You are half a nun; but still you are a woman," persisted the Countess; "and you must know that if a man loves you, he gives you his name—himself. And if Loris has compromised you in the face of all Rome——"

"He has done nothing of the sort," interrupted Corinna, passionately. "I have told you why he came; is it so wonderful he should wish to bid me good-bye?"

"Good-bye does not take three or four hours to say, unless—under very exceptional circumstances."

"He stayed at my wish — at my request," said Corinna, proudly. And she rose and faced her friend with an indignation that almost frightened the pretty,

warm-hearted little woman. "Go, tell that to all Rome if you like, and let them make the best, or worst of it, as they please!"

"*Quelle femme impossible!*" murmured Madame Nina under her breath. Aloud she said: "My dearest, forgive me. I did not mean to offend you, and if you heard all this as common talk—well, put yourself in my place—if you heard such things of me?"

"I should not insult you by believing them."

"I never said I believed. I only repeated what every one else is saying, and you are my friend, you know, Corinna, and it is very hard to have you maligned; and, after all, Fedoroff had no right to treat you with less respect than he does

others, simply because you are alone and unprotected."

"Have you said that often enough?" asked Corinna.

"You are offended, and you are unkind," said Madame Nina, almost tearfully; "and I only told you because I thought it best."

"Best!" All the blood seemed to leap like sudden flame to Corinna's cheek. She could not explain; she was too proud to have her sweet love-secret made the common talk of Rome. Let them think or say what they pleased. What did it matter to her, knowing her lover was her own—knowing, too, her heart's purity, and truth, and steadfastness?

"Doubtless it was best," she said, coldly. "And I know you would not willingly pain

me. But I cannot help what people say, and it is so little to me."

Madame Nina rose. "So little," she echoed. "Ah, my dear, you will not think that always. But that is so like you; you are not of this world at all; you are always in the clouds. And you have shut yourself up here and refused to see any one. Is it any wonder people talk?"

"I have been busy," said Corinna, pushing the heavy, soft hair from off her delicate brows. "I wanted solitude and peace. I hate the sounds and sights of the outer world at such times. You know that."

"I know one thing," said Madame Nina, almost sadly, "and that is, you are very much changed since the days at Allerheiligen. I wish you had never seen

Loris Fedoroff. If you love him, it will spoil all your life."

Long, long afterwards, those words echoed in Corinna's ears, despite the cold and indignant disclaimer that had answered them. Long, long afterwards she seemed to hear them mocking her faith, her love, her hopes.

"It will spoil all your life—all your life!"

CHAPTER III.

"To bear the bonds of life, and death, and fate."

DAY after day found Gilbert Brandon still lingering on in Rome.

He was restless, miserable; haunted by horrible suspicion, convinced that his wild hopes were ended now, utterly and for ever, and yet unable to tear himself away from the scene of his tortures.

He distrusted Loris Fedoroff. He knew that by his means Corinna's name had been bandied about—the sport of every idle gossiping tongue in Rome—

and he resolved to wait there until that name was once more set in honour before the eyes of the world.

In two months Fedoroff would return; in two months they would be wedded; after then, he told himself, that page of his life's book would be for ever closed —all the thoughts and emotions roused by her influence must be forced back into their channels, fought against, sealed down into acquiescence, no matter at what cost.

He faced his future now, and sickening pangs seemed to consume him. He told himself it would be better, far better, that he should look no more on Corinna's face; and yet he longed to look on it, as the home-sick wanderer longs for sight of the land from which he has been severed.

He might read his doom in it; he might see that wonderful new light and loveliness upon it which he had told himself love would bring for her, and yet he thought he would rather bear the agony of such a moment, than dwell in silence and banishment as he was now doing.

In alternations of wretchedness and longing the days passed on. It was two weeks since Fedoroff had left Rome, and Corinna had appeared nowhere in public. In vain Madame Nina raged and argued; in vain she repeated the *on dits* of the society she was outraging. Corinna was immovable in her determination. So Madame Nina told every one that the great authoress was busy upon a new work, and "every one"

appeared to believe it, except Gilbert Brandon. One day in the crowd on the Pincio he heard her name. Some women were talking together. Among them he recognised Miss Spyrle, the American.

"Uncommon queer she was always," said the loud *vibrato* voice. "Objected to be interviewed when I'd have skyed her up no end in the New York papers. Sent the French Countess to me instead. Italian, did you say?—oh, well, it's all the same. A shabby trick, I call it—but I wrote a description of her, and filled up the rest from imagination. Said she looked like a Boticelli, or Lippo Lippi stepped out of its frame for a peep at the outer world. Does she dress like that still? I surmise there ain't many women could stand it. Different? Why, that

shows all *you* know about women. Guess they're all alike when the polish is off, only some wear it deeper than others."

Glancing round here she caught sight of Brandon, and made straight for him.

"How d'ye do?" she said, eagerly. "Fancy meeting *you* in Rome. Thought you didn't like travelling. I haven't forgotten you, you see. D'ye remember me? Miss Jessica Aphrodite Spyrle, you know, of the *New York Forum.* Met you at Allerheiligen — place for trout — Schwarzwald. I surmise you've forgotten."

"No," said Brandon, coolly. "I recollect you perfectly well."

"And you're staying in Rome?" persisted the fair American. "Like it? Having a good time?"

"I — I — yes, I like it," stammered Brandon.

"I've been here three days," continued Miss Spyrle. "Seen everything worth seeing. The Colosseum, and the Pantheon, and St. Peter's, and the Forum, and the Borghese Villa, and the Vatican, and the galleries, and heaps of studios. I'm only here for a week. And where's that friend of yours?—Russian or Polish, wasn't he? I thought him quite a lovely man. Is he here? Sort of man would do for Lohengrin. Ought to be fixed up in armour, and have his portrait painted."

"He is not here," said Brandon, stiffly, as she paused.

"And the authoress—Corinna—she's living by herself in one of those big palazzos, I hear. I feel like going to see her. She cheated me, you know, at the trout place. I hear she don't receive any one but gentlemen. Geniuses always are

queer. There goes Lady Powderpuff. D'ye know her? Awful stiff and stuck up. A ramrod's a joke to it. Oh, there's Sir Wilfred! He's a poet—the new school, you know; the fleshly line; burns, and throbs, and pantings, and lava kisses—that's his sort. Looks mild enough. I must go and speak to him. My friend, the Contessa Perleini, promised to introduce him. Good-bye, Mr. Brandon. See you again!"

She whisked off, while Brandon heaved a sigh of relief.

"What an awful woman!" he muttered, as he turned out of the crowd. "Heaven grant she won't get hold of this story about Corinna!"

Meanwhile Corinna troubled herself very little about the world, and lived on in her paradise of dreams.

She had heard from Loris, and the words of his letter were even more tender and passionate than his spoken words had been. They would meet soon — a few months at furthest—and then they should part no more, unless she wished it. So said his letter, and she read it, smiling happily through a mist of tears, and laid it against her heart, murmuring, "I could never wish that, my love, my love!"

So much of the evil of the world was a dead letter to Corinna, and suspicion she had none.

Her life had been too isolated; too much a thing of books and dreams, not to be also pure in the highest and truest sense of the word. Women friends she had absolutely none save the little Countess, and she had been too much in awe of her, and too full of wonder and admiration

for her, to even dream of corrupting her mind.

Men—even bad men—have an innate respect for a guileless soul, and do not, as a rule, seek wantonly to sully and defile it, but there are only too many women who laugh at innocence as sheer folly, and strip off its pure illusions for mischief, or jealousy, or envy of what they themselves have lost.

"Some day she must know," they say, and so choose the immediate moment for that "some day," caring nothing for the shame, the horror, the disappointment they wantonly cast upon a young and innocent life.

To Corinna, Loris was master and maker of her fate. She loved him, she believed in him; she was content to take his will as her law.

She knew little of men—absolutely nothing of such a man as Fedoroff, and by her love she judged his. No greater mistake can a woman make.

So she lived her calm, studious life among her books and her writings, content to remember his looks, his words, to picture his return—to steep herself in the golden hush and glory of her love, and let all the noise and trouble of the world go by unheeded and unheard. It was so sweet to pause after some transcribed thought—some phrase of eloquence and power, and, forgetting she was a Muse, find herself a woman, and a woman beloved and adored; so sweet to steep her life in fancies of that happy future—to know she stood on the threshold of a kingdom of glory that a word, a look, a kiss, had opened to her sight.

It was little wonder, therefore, that she shunned all other companionship when solitude held so powerful an enchantment. Little wonder that everything else looked small and of poor account, beside this rosy daybreak of her changed and glorified life.

She wondered sometimes that it could be so changed. In so brief a time—by so simple a means. Just the love of one human being in a world of millions; just the knowledge that a life, no wiser, greater, better perhaps than many another life, was bound up with her own.

That was all; the "little all" that meant so much, that would be the blessing or the shipwreck of her soul from this hour.

The weeks drifted by, and Madame Nina was in despair. Not even Raoul

could console her, though he was devotion itself. Corinna would go nowhere, not even to drive on the Pincio. She went out in the early mornings while all the fashionable herd slumbered; the rest of the day she devoted to writing. Even her weekly receptions were given up, and she lived a life as isolated as that of her youth in her old château.

People had grown weary of talking and wondering about her. Perhaps on the whole they were pleased to find she could be eccentric and unlike any one else. It was almost better than to see her in Paris dresses and Russian sables, driving like any other woman on the Pincio.

Only to Gilbert Brandon did this absence, this total inaccessibility, bring sharp torture, coming as a conclusion to that night he knew of. Only to him

did it seem that something more than eccentricity lay at the root of a change so sudden.

But still he waited on, and watched on, though all his life seemed pain and darkness now. In the first early days of February he received a telegram from Loris Fedoroff. It was very brief: "*I return to Rome in two days' time to keep my promise.*"

CHAPTER IV.

"O, more than sunrise to the blind, cold sea."

"YOU have come back; you are safe?"

She said it with glad eyes, looking up to his, with tender arms that wound about his neck, holding him as her life's dearest possession now.

He smiled down on her. It seemed as if she had grown still more beautiful during these months of absence.

"Safe? Yes, my dearest. Your love must have been a talisman to me."

"My prayers, perhaps," she murmured,

softly, thinking how that one name had filled them. He did not heed her. He was wondering if she would be startled by what he was going to say—if she had a soul above show, and fuss, and millinery, since none of these things could go hand in hand with that promise he had given.

He drew her to a seat. The dusk was falling, the great chamber was full of shadows.

"Corinna," he said, softly, "how soon will you marry me?"

She looked at him, startled by the sudden question. Her face grew somewhat pale.

"How—soon?" she faltered.

He drew her closer to his side.

"You know that, all unwittingly, I have done you harm. That night—well, you did not think of yourself when you

bade me stay here, and other eyes saw me leave, and now they say you have secluded yourself ever since, and will go nowhere as you used. There is but one way to shield your honour, and I would have no delay, if you will be guided by my wishes. Let us be married at once—but quietly—without ceremony or show, and then—leave Rome. The world lies all before us; there are many cities and places for you to see yet. It will be my happiness to show you them. Once wedded——"

He stopped abruptly. She had drawn herself from his arms, pale as death and trembling.

"You say this out of pity, because my own imprudence forces you to sacrifice yourself. You would wed me because—because——"

Her voice broke. He rose and drew her to his heart.

"Because I love you," he cried, passionately. "Because I cannot *live* without you—because no other woman on the face of this earth can ever be to me what you are. My darling, rest assured that if there is any question of sacrifice it is on your part, not on mine."

She drew a deep breath. Her face flushed, her eyes looked up to his with all her soul speaking out all her love.

"You know I am yours," she said, falteringly. "Do with me as you wish. When I gave you my heart, I gave you all."

An hour later she sat alone, gazing dreamily into the fire, her whole heart

stirred by this sweet tumult of unrest that her lover's words had brought.

Her servant entered with a card. "The gentleman says his business is important," he said, as his mistress glanced carelessly at the name.

She read it with some wonder. "Mr. Brandon. What can he want?"

Then desiring the man to admit him, she threw herself negligently back in her chair.

He came in, pale, grave, self-repressed. He had nerved himself for the ordeal, but he felt it was more terrible than he feared.

She looked so radiant, so beautiful, so entranced with her new happiness, that it smote him to the heart. He touched her hand and took the seat she pointed out, and felt his brain growing

dizzy beneath the wonderful spell of her presence.

"It is long since we met," she said, wondering at his silence. "I did not know you were still in Rome."

"I leave immediately," he said in a low, repressed voice. "I but came to bid you adieu, Mademoiselle D'Avisgnes, and to ask you one question."

"Yes?" she said, raising her eyes to his in innocent surprise.

"Are you going to marry Loris Fedoroff?"

It was so abrupt, so unexpected a demand, that she hesitated from sheer surprise. Then a warm flush mounted slowly to her temples.

"That is a strange question, Monsieur," she said, coldly.

"Strange or not, it is a question I must have answered," he said, impatiently. "You know there are moments in life when one ceases to be conventional, when one *feels* too deeply for commonplace speeches. I feel as if I were passing through some such phase of emotion. The barrier which circumstances have placed between us is no barrier to me now. Tell me—is this true?"

"It is true!"

The words were very low, but he saw the light leap into her eyes, and the flush glow yet more deeply in her cheek.

He drew a long, deep breath. His hopes were ended, his doom was sealed. He knew that across the sweetest, fairest page of his life he must write but one word—"Finis."

"And you are—happy," he muttered, rising slowly to his feet like one half-stunned.

"Oh, so happy!" she said, with a smile that was like sunlight. "I seem to wonder how I have lived all these years—content, yet not knowing——"

She stopped. It was never easy to bare her feelings, and that unspoken word meant so much to her. He felt cold and chilled.

"Yes—yes," he said, impatiently. "It is all new and wonderful and beautiful, and you think it will last. That too is a dream; but while you dream and close your eyes to the world you are happy."

"Ah, but it *will* last," she said, smiling softly. "I know, I feel it will. Tell me, how did you hear—does every one know?"

His brow darkened. He was silent. How could he say to her: "I watched this man at your house. Your love for him has cost you your reputation. It is I who wrung from him the promise to repair his fault—to set your name before the world pure and honoured still."

How could he say this, or breathe to her in her perfect faith his suspicions of this man's real nature?

He felt it would be kinder to slay her, than to bring the poison of doubt into this atmosphere of perfect trust.

"I heard it," he said, slowly, "from Fedoroff himself. You are to be wedded almost immediately?"

"Yes," she answered very low. "He wishes it."

"And have you no friends—no relatives—no one to be with you?" he urged.

She lifted her eyes in wonder

"I told you I was alone in the world. But even if I had friends and relatives I do not need them—now."

So full, so content was she in this her love, that he could only look at her dumbly, wonderingly; while his heart beat with dull, laboured throbs and the blood in his veins seemed to grow chill. It seemed to him that never till this moment had he understood what pain could mean.

"It is not wise, or, indeed, right, for a woman to be quite alone," he muttered. "There is Madame Nina——"

"Was this your important business, Monsieur?" she asked, abruptly.

Her words—her look, stung him to madness. He forgot prudence, reason, self-control.

"No, it was not," he said, fiercely.

"I came to warn you—to urge you to be on your guard. To see that Fedoroff did in reality marry you. You are so innocent—so pure. You do not guess or even suspect what baseness there is in men. And he—he has loved so often; but you—only once, and it will be all your life! Ah! I know that—too well."

His voice broke. She had sprung to her feet, angry, amazed, indignant, beyond all power of words.

"Monsieur," she cried, "you forget yourself. Your words are an insult to me—to your friend——"

"He is no friend of mine," cried Brandon, passionately. "I hate him. Ah, forgive me," he implored, as he saw how pale she grew—how cold and stern her eyes looked as they met his own. "I have no right, I know, to say those words,

She knew that he loved her as few men love, though she had neither sought nor desired it. Then he pressed his lips to her hand, and with no further word or look passed from her presence into the coldness and darkness that seemed the emblems of his future life.

She sank back in her low chair by the fire, and tears gathered on her lashes and dropped slowly on her white and slender hands.

Already the serpent had entered her paradise of joy, already amidst her gladness and her dreams stole the presage of pain and trouble that is never very far from—love.

CHAPTER V.

"Made of memory long ago . . ."

IT is abominable—it is absurd—it is ungrateful," stormed Madame Nina, flinging down her parasol and bonnet, and pacing up and down like a little fury. "No; don't speak to me, Count. The idea of any woman getting married like that—positively as if it were something to be ashamed of. No *corbeille*—no *trousseau*—nothing! And saying not a word to any one; and I her friend, and for years sacrificing everything to travel with her, and look after her. It is monstrous!"

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"*Mais,* Madame," pleaded the Comte de Chaumont, who had followed the angry little beauty into her hotel. "What is there so very strange? Your friend wished to be married quietly and unostentatiously; in that I think she shows her admirable sense——"

"Sense!" screamed the little Countess. "Sense — you call it! Oh, very well, Monsieur, then you take her part against me! You think I have no sense because I call such conduct perfectly atrocious—unaccountable!"

"*Au contraire,* Madame, you know that in my eyes all you do is adorable—but at present you are a little unjust—you are put out——"

"Put out! I should think I was put out. Of course, I knew she had a liking for Fedoroff. It was rather amusing;

she's been so very *exaltée* and hard to please, and didn't believe in love. But to marry in this sort of way—really, I never heard anything like it in my life —never!"

The Count sighed. He thought Corinna a sensible woman, but it would never do to say so.

"And now they've left Rome," persisted Madame Nina. "And every one's talking about it, and they all come to me—to *me*, do you hear, Count? And I know nothing, absolutely nothing. I say she has treated me shamefully, and I shall never forgive her—never!"

The Count smiled. Madame Nina's denunciations were always so violent, and so shortlived. He knew what "never" meant from her lips.

"*Chère* Comtesse, do not fret your-

self," he entreated. "If your friend has disappointed you, will you not let me again urge the constancy and devotion that only await your acceptance?"

He took her hand and tried to draw her to his side, but she frowned and moved abruptly away.

"I have told you, Count, I don't wish to marry."

"But you don't dislike me, and I have loved you so long, despite——"

"The cigars!" she interposed quickly, and laughed with pretty mischief at his clouded face.

"You are cruel," he said, coldly. "It is not fair to trifle with any man's feelings as you have done with mine. I know you are *coquette 'au bout des ongles;'* but still I fancy there is something deeper, worthier in your nature, and it is that to which

I appeal. I am no longer a young man. I cannot waste all my years on a will-o'-the-wisp that always escapes me. If you say that you do not love me I will leave you; I will urge you no more. But if I am to believe your words, your looks, your manner of late, I do not think you will be so untrue to—yourself. Am I right?"

The clouds cleared from the pretty *mignonne* face. She hesitated a moment, then slowly seated herself on the couch.

"Love is such folly," she murmured, pouting like a spoilt child.

"Then try—marriage," he whispered, and drew her unrebuked into his arms.

It was quite true.

Gold had bought expedition and secrecy, and Corinna had been quite passive, and

agreed to every wish of Fedoroff's without hesitation.

As soon as the marriage ceremony was over, they left Rome, and by noon every one—that is to say, every one who was *any one*—knew of the whole affair, and enlarged upon it to their hearts' content. But the two principals in the matter were far away, and troubled themselves not a whit about it.

As the hours wore on, it seemed to Corinna that Loris grew strangely restless and disturbed. His manner was not that of a happy lover—certainly not that of a man whose hopes had been crowned by attainment.

Sometimes he seemed on the point of speaking, then as abruptly turned away and maintained the gloomy silence that distressed her.

"Does anything trouble you?" she asked him once.

"Only I fear you may one day regret——" he answered, and then suddenly his face flushed. He drew her close to his heart. "Tell me you never will," he said hoarsely. "Tell me you love me alone—beyond all others in this world!"

"Is there need to tell you *that*?" she said, in her low, soft voice, that was like music. "Have I not given you—myself?"

He was silent. In his heart he was saying: "Is it, after all, so wrong? She loves me—me alone; and she will never know."

CHAPTER VI.

An odour as of love and of love's dreams.

. . . . . .

Of loves that lived a lily's life and died;
Of dreams now dwelling where dead roses dwell.

SWINBURNE.

A MONTH had glided by—a month that seemed to Corinna like a beautiful dream. She had seen many fair places, and loitered in many lovely spots haunted by traditions, sweet with storied lore, fair as only southern lands can be when the glory of spring is dawning over their tranquil winter sleep.

Loris had said, "In the spring we will go to Venice; I have a palace there," and

she had acquiesced, as she did in all things he wished.

Perhaps it would have been better had she been less humble and obedient, had she preserved greater independence of thought and speech; but there are women who yield to the man they love a complete submission, who, as it were, merge their very identity into his own, who, having given him their love, accept him as guide, ruler, sovereign henceforward.

In Corinna's nature strength and simplicity were strangely mingled, and for the first time she seemed to taste happiness. So long she had dwelt alone, so long she had been without human ties and now the richness and completeness of her life almost dazzled her with wonder. Loris was her lover and her lord in the

truest sense of the word. It pleased her to yield him complete obedience—it pleased her to show him that the woman whom the world called cold and proud and "impossible" could be to him as the meekest and tenderest of slaves.

Yet she was unwise. To a man like Loris Fedoroff this pure and passionate devotion only assured him of his powers of mastery. Out of all the world of men she had known, this gifted, noble creature had chosen him, had set him up on a pinnacle of self-raised nobility, and worshipped him as something infinitely greater, goodlier, wiser than his compeers. And in his heart he knew he was none of these things, and the knowledge shamed and irritated him.

So often a woman loves a man—not for what he is, but for what she thinks him.

Had Corinna been like other women—had she been vain, coquettish, worldly, she would have joyed in making *her* power felt, in bending him to her will, instead of stooping to his in that lowly obedience which was so new and so sweet to her.

But she was unwise in her generation, and — she loved. In that all is said.

The days and the weeks drifted dreamily by, and the cool, fresh, early spring found them among the water streets of Venice. To Corinna it was all new, all enchanting. Even modern innovations that had destroyed the picturesque for the sake of the useful, could not rob the place of its charm.

The silence, the gloomy archways, the gliding waters, the salt scents of the marshy

shores, the great dusky piles of palaces, the places of historic interest, or poetic fame —all these things appealed to her as they could do to no ordinary curious sight-seer. And her delight almost amused Loris, for whom all cities, even the fairest, had long lost the charm of novelty or interest.

The *palazzo* where Loris took her was a strange, fantastic place, very old, very gloomy, very full of discomfort, but in her eyes beautiful exceedingly. The chambers were large and lofty, and he led her to one of them with a polished floor of mosaic, and stained glass casements that faced the sea, and told her it was to be a study for her own use. The ceilings were frescoed, there were great bookcases in the embrasures of the deep windows, there were beautiful statues

standing in the halo of coloured sunlight, and seats covered with Eastern stuffs, and a great carved oak writing-table, on which stood a bowl of lilies that scented all the place. Her eyes took in its artistic beauty, and recognising the thought and tenderness that had prepared it, turned lovingly to him in silent thanks.

"I am glad you like it," he said, as he drew her to his side. "It is your own; no one will disturb or intrude upon you. I felt inclined to inscribe over the doorway, 'Sacred to my wife's genius;' but I will keep the thought in my heart instead."

"It is more than beautiful," she murmured. "Is this to be our home?"

"I am too much of a bird of passage to have a settled home," said Loris. "I

bought this place years ago. We will stay here sometimes in the spring or autumn; in the winter I like Paris, and the summer we can spend in travelling."

"And have you no home in your own land?" she asked.

A dark frown gathered on his brow. He released her from his arms and turned away.

"No," he said, briefly; "I hate it. At stated times I am obliged to go there, being a Russian noble; but I never stay there an hour longer than I am compelled, and I never wish to take you there."

"Why?" she asked, as the first fear of even a far-off separation came home to her. "I should not mind how dreary or wild it was, if I were with you."

"There is no need to trouble about it at present," said Loris, impatiently. "I

shall not need to go there for a long time."

Corinna saw that the subject displeased him, and let it drop like a wise woman. Besides, she was quite content with the manner of life mapped out for her, and the present was so full of happiness, she put aside that momentary dread with all the more willingness.

"What a beautiful life mine will be now," she thought to herself as she moved over to the open casement, and watched the sun setting over the gleaming waters, "to live here, and dream, and work, and —love. And once I deemed myself content. I have not even *lived* till now!"

"It seems so strange to be idle," Corinna said, as the weeks glided by. "Should you mind, Loris, if I gave some

hours to work? The book I was writing in Rome is only half-finished."

"Mind! Certainly not," he answered, readily. "I should be sorry to interfere with your inclinations. I only want you to be happy."

"I am always that now," she answered, tenderly. "Sometimes I feel almost afraid. There was a time when I scarcely cared whether I lived or died. Now, I count the days too short for all the joy they hold."

The look on her face smote him with that sense of reproach her words so often brought.

"You care for me too much," he said, hurriedly. "No man is worth such perfect worship—and from a woman like you——"

He stopped abruptly. He was looking

at her, and it seemed to him as if he had never fully realised how beautiful she was. Her face—her eyes—her whole form seemed transfigured with the glory that was in her soul—the soul that he had wakened from its dreams to bring into the prison of his selfish love. In the fulness and richness of her womanhood, her genius, her devotion, he knew she was as far above all other women in whose ears he had whispered his light vows, as the stars were above the perishing words of earth.

They were standing together in her own room, and the dusk was falling softly about them. A sort of horror seized him as he thought of what he had done—of a wrong that nothing now could alter or amend—that no river of remorse could wash from his soul in all the years to come.

"God help us; what brutes men are," he muttered. "You should have reigned alone, my spotless queen; no man is worthy to touch the hem of your garment."

Her arms stole about his throat, her head drooped lower—lower, till it rested on his breast. She could hear the quick pulsations of his heart.

"But I loved you," she murmured, so low he could scarcely hear her. "And have you not told me love sanctifies all?"

"But do you think so! Would you not rather be free, unfettered, as you were?"

"No, a thousand times no!" she cried with sudden passion. "I would rather die than lose you, than not have had your love!"

And again that thrill of triumph ran

through his heart. Again he felt that to be victor over such a nature, to have this woman loving him as a woman loves, was a conquest worthy of an emperor.

From that hour he gave himself up to the perfect abandonment of his triumph and his love; wooing her low answers, and tender acknowledgments, and rarely yielded caresses, as he alone could woo when he chose to do so.

"If I could only forget all in my life, save you," he murmured, involuntarily, and she, meeting his lips, never even asked what there was in that life to forget!

It only seemed to her that it could hold no error—no wrong—no sin that her great love would not forgive, or for which *his* would not atone.

So blind—so weak—so foolish is a woman when she loves.

The next day he came to her while she was still in her dressing-room.

In his hand he held an open letter. His face looked troubled.

"My dearest," he said, "I find I must leave you for a week. I have to go to Paris."

"To Paris!" She turned white as death. "May I not come too?" she entreated.

"What, for a week?" he said, lightly. "Nonsense, love! You would be knocked up with travelling. No, no, stay here and work, as you told me you intended doing. In seven days I shall be back."

He had never spoken to her like this —so coldly, so imperatively. He did not mean to hurt her, but when men are disturbed or annoyed they forget how easy it is to jar the fine strings of a woman's

sensitive nature. She crushed back the rising sob in her throat, and turned away. But her hands were cold and trembled, and all the sunshine in the room seemed blinding her.

He saw the change in her face, and his heart smote him. He came and took her in his arms.

"My love, you must not grieve," he said. "A parting so brief is scarcely worth a thought. I shall be back so soon."

With a great effort she calmed her voice sufficiently to answer him.

"I said last night I was too happy. If you must go, you must; only to be alone seems so terrible now."

He kissed her and soothed her with tender words. Manlike, the thought of a change to this lotus-eating existence seemed far from unpleasant. A brief absence

would but stimulate his passion—the stir and excitement of the outer world would but give greater zest to the dreamy tranquillity of his life with her.

So, ere many hours had gone, he had left her side—she outwardly content, for fear of giving him pain or vexation, but it seemed as if her heart and all her life's bright dreams lay dead at her feet; that, having come with him, they had, with him, perished.

How that first day passed she scarcely knew. Its hours were full of bitter weeping and terrible weariness. The first sense of loss and desolation was heavy upon her, as it is upon all who have grown used to any one thing in the routine of life, and then suddenly lost it. Besides, this parting was full of an inexplicable dread. It seemed to her like a grave-

stone on the blossoms of love and happiness that had been hers for so brief a time. It seemed to crush her as with a weight of years while the long, sad hours went by.

In the dusk she sat in her own study, and tried to recall that tender scene of the previous night; the memory of his kisses, his passionate words, that had thrilled her with an inexplicable joy.

The room spoke of him as dumb and silent things sometimes do; spoke of his thought, his care, his taste; of happy hours spent there together; of long talks, and hushed and eloquent pauses, and blissful dreams, while the stars came out one by one in the dusky evening sky, and from the smooth, dark waters floated the melancholy, far-off notes of a gondolier's song.

But the place had no charm for her now, for a great hopelessness had fallen on her. It was unaccountable, it was foolish, yet all the same it was there, and her dim eyes and aching heart spoke out its presence plainly.

The stars grew clearer, the moon had risen and silvered all the dusky, ruined palaces and crooked, dingy streets with its alchemy of magic; but she sat motionless as a figure of stone. The night held no beauty for her now, for her life was no longer her own.

At last the opening of the door roused her. She started, half ashamed of the wild and momentary hope that had stirred her heart—a hope that Loris had returned. But it was only a servant with a letter.

She took it mechanically, and broke

the seal. He placed a lamp on the table and withdrew.

She saw a few brief lines in French:

"*If you are Loris Fedoroff's wife, the writer of this must see you immediately. He waits below.*"

CHAPTER VII.

"From the fair first joy to the grief."

SHE read the words once—twice, with a sense of bewilderment and a prescience of coming trouble. At last she laid the letter down and touched a silver hand-bell on the table beside her.

"The messenger who brought this—is he waiting?" she asked.

"Yes, Madame."

"Admit him."

The door closed. She seated herself on a low chair by the window. The

silver light from without stole softly in and touched her beautiful dusky hair—the white folds of her dress—the knot of crimson carnations at her bosom. Unconscious of how fair a picture she made, her eyes turned to the door as it opened.

She had expected to see a servant, but the man who entered was so different to her preconceived ideas that involuntarily she rose.

The stranger wore the garb of a priest. His face was pale and austere. He paused midway in the great shadowy room and bowed low.

"Do I address the Countess Fedoroff?" he asked in French.

Corinna bowed. "Your pleasure, Monsieur?" she said, coldly.

He came a few steps nearer and looked

at her. "It *is* true, then?" he said below his breath.

His white face, his stern, cold eyes, alarmed Corinna; she sank back on her seat.

"Madame," said the priest, in his slow, measured accents, "I fear I bring you bad news. You say you are married to Loris Fedoroff?"

"Yes," faltered Corinna. Her lips trembled. Try as she might she could frame no question, nor put into words the dread that had seized her.

"I heard as much," he answered. "I did not credit it at first. But the rumour was verified as many another action of Loris Fedoroff's has been. How or why he knows not. Madame, in marrying you has he confided to you aught of his previous life—I mean his early life in Russia?"

Corinna hesitated. In her loyalty and love she hated to betray to this stranger anything that might sound prejudicial to the character of her husband. "He has told me all that was necessary for me to know," she said with quiet dignity.

"Do not be offended, Madame," said her visitor, earnestly. "Believe me, it is from no light motives I spoke. Has he told you anything of Nadia Kovalenska?"

Corinna shook her head. "I never heard that name," she said; "but if my husband had deemed it necessary I should know any of his family concerns, he would have told me."

A strange smile crept to the priest's thin lips.

"You have great trust in him, Madame. Yet there are not many men who care to be too confidential to their wives respecting

what has been 'before.' Count Fedoroff is no exception. He has deceived you. He has married you, you say. But he was not free to do that, and he knew it."

For a moment all grew dark before Corinna's eyes. She felt stunned—bewildered. Then a great wave of indignation swept away that momentary paralysis of thought. Loris deceive her! Loris, her lover, her hero! It was impossible. She sprang to her feet.

"Monsieur, your calling protects you from what I would say to any other who stood before me, and libelled my husband to my face. I can only hope you will discover your error and atone for it to him."

He looked at her flushed cheeks—her proud, defiant eyes, and his face softened to involuntary compassion.

"Madame," he said, solemnly, "I only wish it were an error. Confront your husband with me—bring him here at this moment, and then see whether he can deny the truth of what I state."

Her colour faded, leaving her white as her dress.

"He is not here," she faltered. "He is in Paris."

The priest came a few steps nearer.

"Madame," he said, gravely, "indeed I regret that I am the bearer of ill news. I will tell you my story briefly. The Count owns large possessions in Vologda, nine hundred versts from Petersburg. Some years ago, while his mother was living, a young and beautiful girl came to reside with her as companion. She was a distant relation of the Fedoroff family. Loris was then at home on a visit, and he and

Nadia Kovalenska fell in love with each other. He feared to offend his mother by wedding the girl, and he came to me and asked me to marry them secretly. I was only the parish priest, but I was a young man then, and in my visits to the old Countess I had seen a great deal of this young girl, and I, too, loved her. In Russia, priests of the lower order of the clergy are allowed to marry, and I knew she was poor, and at the death of her protectress would be friendless. I thought it no sin to raise my eyes to her, but when Count Loris told me of his love, I knew my hopes were at an end. And I was right. I stifled back my desires, I tried to reconcile myself to my fate, and agreed to the Count's wishes. A week after they were wedded the old Countess died. I thought then that

Count Fedoroff would acknowledge his bride publicly, and take her to Petersburg and give her that position in the world to which she was entitled. But six months—a year passed, and the marriage was still concealed. At last, one day he came to me in deep distress, and confided to me a secret so terrible that I no longer wondered that he shrank from proclaiming to the world what he had done. I pitied him, but I could not help him. I knew his passion for the girl he had married had changed into rooted abhorrence, but he had been mad to make her his wife, and nothing could alter that fact. Once assured of this, he seemed to grow reckless. He was rarely at home—rarely, except at such times as Court etiquette demanded, in Russia at all. He grew dissipated and extravagant—he made

himself few friends but many enemies. Still, be where he might, or go where he would, I took care that his actions should be known to me. That is why I am here now. Do you still disbelieve me, or have you agreed with him that you will claim no rights, no rank, nothing of what is virtually hers, any more than if the world knew you—what he knows you to be—his mistress?"

Corinna had sat there like a stone, listening to the history of treachery and shame by which she had been wronged. For an instant something had urged her to deny it—to shriek out vengeance on this false accuser—to order him from her sight as something that outraged and offended her.

But, despite herself, the conviction that he was speaking truth came home to

her tortured heart. A thousand memories flashed over her of the warnings she had received against her lover; the words of Brandon, of Madame Nina, stood in array against her own implicit trust. The silence that followed the priest's words was full of horror; their crowning insult she scarcely noticed; in the tangled confusion of her thoughts she could grasp but one idea—that the man she had worshipped had wantonly deceived her, that all the wealth of love she had lavished upon him had been powerless to save her from the worst and cruellest wrong man can inflict on woman.

She calmed herself at last; pride came to her rescue. She rose and faced the man who had shattered her dream of happiness, as cold, and pale, and stern as though his words had carried with them

no credence, and no fear. "Of course you have proof of your statement," she said, calmly, "I cannot lightly believe in my husband's dishonour. This—this lady, you are sure she still lives?"

"Sure," he answered. "I visit her constantly."

"Then, what reason can Count Fedoroff have for concealing his marriage?"

Bravely she spoke out the words that were as the death-knell of her happiness, giving still no sign of the inward wound which seemed slowly, cruelly, sapping the very life-springs of her being.

"That is a question for Count Fedoroff to answer," said the priest, looking at her with involuntary admiration. "If he has kept his secret from you, and professed to marry you, he has lied in the face of

God and man. I did not believe the story when I heard it. But as soon as I did hear it, I did what few of my calling have either the will or the power to do. I left my village to the care of a friend, and came on the track of the Count. I resolved to see him — or you. I feel grieved for you, dear lady, but in the cause of honour and justice I could not have let you remain in ignorance. Besides, though the secret has been well guarded, it yet might have come to your ears. If Count Loris has wronged you, as your words imply, you are not the first woman who can bring that charge against him."

"Hush!" she said, hoarsely. "You are his enemy — your conduct goes to prove that. You have said enough.

I — I will myself ask him if it is true."

"And if he denies it?" sneered the priest.

"I shall believe him," she answered, proudly.

"But he will not deny it," the priest said, with his cold smile. "Not if you tell him that Ivan Pisaroff brought you the news, for he knows that the Countess Nadia has a friend still. And now my errand is done. I return to Vologda without delay."

He bowed, and left her standing there, her face blanched, her lips dumb, an unutterable horror upon her that could frame itself into neither word nor cry.

As the door closed, her eyes turned piteously, imploringly to the dim night

sky. Then she sank back on the low cushioned seat, and covered her face with her cold and trembling hands.

Could it be true—this thing? Was Loris indeed only a man whose selfish passion could wreck a woman's life with as little remorse as a child would crush a flower?

"And I loved him so, I loved him so!" she cried, as she thought of her perfect faith, her simple trust, and a feeling of bitter, passionate rage swept over her like a whirlwind.

"I will go to him. I will ask him if this is true," she cried, springing to her feet. "He will not look me in the face and tell me a lie. He dare not."

Then the anger vanished. Trembling, weeping, she cast herself down on the

floor. "My love!" she moaned, "my love—you could not so wrong my faith in you."

For even in this moment of extreme agony she clung to that idol she had worshipped. She could not bear to think of it shattered at her feet—laid low in the dust like any base and common thing. Yet a doubt crept into her mind, maddening her with its horror. For, try as she might, she could not but feel he had lied to her already.

The priest went down the marble steps and out into the hushed, sweet darkness of the Venetian night. A faint remorse touched him as the gondola bore him swiftly along, and his eyes sought that chamber with its solitary light, and he thought of the pale, proud occupant battling with her agony of shame.

"It was ignoble," he muttered to himself. "I know that—but it was my revenge. I could only reach him through her."

CHAPTER VIII.

"I AM NOT—YOUR WIFE!"

HOW the hours of that night passed Corinna never knew.

Sleep never visited her eyes, a feverish pain throbbed in her heart, her brain was all in a tumult. With the early dawn she rose and began her hurried preparations. He had told her the name of his hotel in Paris. She had resolved to follow him. To wait here through seven long days and nights of suspense would kill her, she thought. Her whole soul seemed to hold but one longing—the longing to confront him, to look in his eyes and say, "Is this thing

true?" And then—— Her brain refused to follow out that thread of thought. If it were false, she knew it would be like the giving back of life to the condemned; if true—no death, or torture, or suffering that the world might hold, would have any terrors for her from that hour.

When her servants asked her orders she gazed at them strangely. In this hour of supreme suffering all things of household need, and all conventionalities, seemed of such small account. She told them she was going away for a few days, and refused to let any one accompany her. Then she left the home of her brief wedded happiness and went out, and was borne over the dark gliding waters to the great, noisy, bustling station, and soon after was speeding over the barren plains, with Venice receding like a dream city in the distance.

The one feverish longing to be in Paris, to see Loris, sustained her against all sense of fatigue. Mechanically she ate, and drank, and slept, and changed from train to train.

It was night when at last she reached Paris. The lamps were shining, the streets were gay, and full of noise, and bustle, and chattering crowds. She left the station, and taking her small hand-bag, summoned a passing *voiture*, and bade the man drive her to the hotel.

Now that she was so near her destination, the violence of her excitement began to pass off, and a sort of fear took its place. A fear of Loris's anger at her conduct—her pursuit.

Soon the *voiture* stopped. The man opened the door, and she alighted, paid, and dismissed him. Entering the bril-

liantly-illumined portico, she went straight to the bureau, and asked the official if Count Fedoroff was staying there. The man glanced at the beautiful, agitated face with pardonable curiosity, then turned over the leaves of his book and ran his finger over the numbers of the various rooms. "I have no such name here, Madame," he said, politely.

Corinna stared at him incredulously. "No such name! Oh, but he must be here. He would have been in Paris to-day, and that was to be his address. Oh, Monsieur, pray look again. You may have passed over his name."

The official shook his head, his dignity was hurt. "I have no such name," he answered, frigidly. "Madame has been misinformed. The gentleman is not here. Perhaps it is some other hotel she means."

Corinna turned away stunned, sick, trembling. No, she had made no mistake. Here was the name of the hotel in Loris's own handwriting. Had he deceived her again?

The lights seemed to swim before her eyes. She staggered out into the beautiful, brilliant street.

People looked at her curiously, but she saw no one. Her brain seemed dull and dizzy, and a great faintness came over her. Suddenly a face flashed before her out of the mists swimming over her eyes — a voice glad and familiar reached her ear. "Madame Fedoroff— Corinna! Is it you?"

She turned and saw Gilbert Brandon.

Something in the brave, honest, kindly face struck home to her with a sense of safety and relief. She seized his out-

stretched hand, and broke out into incoherent words. It seemed to her that he might know where Loris was.

His brow grew dark as he listened. He shook his head. "I am only passing through Paris. I have seen nothing of your husband," he said, almost coldly. "But do not distress yourself so. He may have changed his mind—the hotel might have been full—many things might have arisen to prevent his coming here."

She wrung her hands despairingly. "I must see him," she cried, wildly. "It is life and death. Oh, Monsieur, find him. You said you would be my friend once. If I ever wanted one I need one at this moment. Oh, tell me, will you seek him for me? I shall go mad with suspense."

"Hush—pray try and calm yourself," urged Brandon. "Of course you will find

him. In Paris it is always easy to trace any one, you know. By to-morrow you shall have the information you require."

"To-morrow," she moaned, despairingly. "Another night of agony. Oh, I shall die if this goes on."

"Let me take you to an hotel," he urged; "you are faint and spent. When you have rested and refreshed yourself, you will be better."

She sighed. That deadly faintness again stole over her. Her head drooped on his shoulder, unconsciousness sealed her senses, and Brandon, supporting her with one arm, hailed a passing cab, and, assisting her into it, bade the man drive to the Hôtel Scribe.

He let down the window and the cool air revived her. Marvelling what sorrow had overtaken her already, and with all the

memory of his hopeless passion awakened at sight of the woman he loved, Brandon yet controlled himself sufficiently to soothe and comfort her. At the hotel he ordered a sitting-room and bedroom for her, and assisted her thither with his old courtly deference.

Wearied and spent, she was like a child in his hands. He removed her travelling-cloak and persuaded her to lie down on the couch, and with his own hands brought her the refreshment he saw she so sorely needed.

All the time as he looked at her changed face and weary eyes, he was consumed with a jealous hatred of the man who had supplanted him, and won this treasure only to destroy it.

"Not wedded three months—and it has come to this," he thought in his hot anger,

but yet he spoke no word, betrayed no curiosity, for fear of adding to her sufferings or her shame.

Months of bodily illness could scarcely have changed Corinna as had these long, pain-filled hours of agony and suspense. Now, utterly exhausted, she lay there and listened to Brandon's kindly cheering, and felt somehow that he was so strong, and brave, and clever, she could trust to him in this her bewilderment and trouble.

When she seemed better he entreated her to go to rest, and leave the discovery of Loris to him. "When you wake in the morning," he said, "I shall have his address ready for you, be sure of that."

And Corinna let herself be persuaded, and even took the sleeping draught for

which Brandon sent, and which, in her state of excitement and terror, was indeed necessary.

Hours of deep, dreamless slumber soothed her brain and restored her strength. When she woke in the morning and looked at her watch, she found it was already nine.

Hurriedly she bathed and dressed, and went downstairs to her sitting-room. The first person she saw was Brandon. He came and took her hands. He did not wait to be questioned. "I have found him," he said, calmly. "He will be here by eleven. Now pray do not agitate yourself. Your breakfast is ready, and you must take it. You surely would not greet your husband with such white cheeks and trembling limbs?"

But she was quite unnerved, and fell

into the chair he had placed for her with a sob of relief.

"Oh, how good you are," she cried, "how good! And you are sure, quite sure he will come?"

"He promised," said Brandon, curtly.

"And was he angry — surprised — I mean that I should be here?" she asked, timidly.

"Surprised he certainly was. The reason you did not find him was very simple. He went to an hotel close to the Gare de Lyon as it was so late when he arrived. He was going to the Hôtel de Londres to-day."

Her agitation was still very great. She tried to check the hysterical sobs, but in vain. Now that the strain was in some degree lessened—now that she knew in a short space of time her doubts

would be set at rest, she felt frightened —unnerved. It seemed to her that she had acted foolishly—impulsively—and that Loris would be angry. Already her belief in the story of the Russian priest began to fade away at the thought of her husband's presence.

Brandon spoke to her gently but firmly, and some of her old pride and self-restraint came back to her.

"You must forgive me," she said when she grew calmer; "but I have had a great trouble, and nothing can set it at rest until I see Loris. Oh, I was so happy, and then when he left me all this came upon me, and he——"

"Does he know of it?" asked Brandon as she paused.

"No," she said with a shudder. "Have I not told you it is for that I came? I

was obliged to see him. I felt I must tell him of—of this."

"Well, he will soon be here," said Brandon, consolingly, "and then your trouble will be set at rest, I hope. Meanwhile, I must again assert my rights as a sort of amateur physician, and prescribe you some breakfast. It will never do for you to meet your husband in this state."

"Then you must share your own prescription," she said, "for indeed I cannot sit down alone."

Brandon flushed suddenly. It occurred to him that if Loris found him breakfasting *tête-à-tête* with his wife in her private room he might not look upon the matter as so insignificant, as Corinna in her innocence imagined.

"I should be delighted," he said, kindly,

"but I have an appointment, and I am late for it already. Later in the day I will call again, if you will permit, and I hope to find you more like your old self."

Seeing he would not be persuaded she let him go, and then drank some coffee; to eat was impossible.

Then she sat down at the window overlooking the courtyard to watch with what patience she could for the arrival of Loris.

The minutes passed slowly on—eleven o'clock struck; her heart began to beat violently, and every sound and step sent a thrill of nervous expectancy through her veins. Half-past eleven—twelve—still he did not come.

The old agony of suspense was upon her, and mingled with it a sense of in-

dignation. He knew she was alone in a strange place; why did he not come?

At last when she was growing hopeless the door was thrown open. She sprang from her seat with a low, sobbing cry, and was folded in his arms.

For a moment neither spoke, then somewhat coldly he asked her why she had done so foolish a thing?

The sound of his voice brought back the memory of her sufferings and her doubts. Yet now, here in his arms, with his kisses yet warm upon her brow, how could she speak of treachery and wrong? She half withdrew herself from his embrace, and looked up in the face she loved so well.

"My dearest," she murmured, "you must forgive me. I was nearly mad; I could not help it. I felt I *must* see you."

He smiled as one assured and conscious of his power. "Foolish one," he murmured tenderly, "could you not spare me for even so brief a time? You, who once were all-sufficient for yourself and never knew an idle hour?"

She saw her words had misled him. He was so far from suspecting the truth. "It was not only that," she said, flushing like a rose, and drawing herself still further away, "though to be without you was terrible; but it was what I heard. Loris," for she saw his face change and his eyes take alarm, "oh, Loris—my husband—my love, say it is not true—say that you are really mine."

"Yours?—of course; what nonsense are you talking?" he said, sternly. "Who has been gossiping about me? Is *this* your faith, Corinna? Is this my muse, my

queen among women listening to idle scandalmongers?"

A faint colour came into her cheeks. "No, no!" she said, eagerly. "Only he came so far, and being a priest how could I disbelieve him? Not all at once, not unless you——"

She paused. She saw his face grow ashy pale; his hands fell from her, he stepped back. "Loris," she cried in terror. "Loris, my husband, say it is not true—only one word, one little word and I am yours and you are mine, and I shall never—never doubt you again."

But he was silent.

"Dear," she entreated, and her voice lost its firmness and her eyes looked at him, piteous, terrified—the eyes of one who sees herself condemned. "Do you not hear? Can you not understand why

I come to you? I would hear the truth only from yourself. Loris—Loris, are you dumb? Do you know what this priest, this Ivan Pisaroff, told me? That you are married already, that I am not your wife, I——"

"You *are* my wife," he said; but his voice trembled, his glance did not meet her own, and though her great love blinded her eyes, she read, not the frank, indignant denial of a man wrongfully accused, but the prevarication and cowardice of one to whom subterfuge is no new thing.

She looked him through and through, and her heart grew like a stone in her breast. "Do not tell me a lie," she said, piteously. "Any pain is better than that. Is Nadia Kovalenska your—wife?"

He met her glance. His eyes sank, his lips turned white and trembled, but

at least he could not speak *that* lie—not to her face.

He said nothing.

That silence fell upon her like a stone, crushing hope, faith, love, all fair and glorious things from out her life for ever. She turned aside, and shuddering, clasped her hands before her face, as if to shut out from her sight some foul and hideous thing.

"Oh, my dreams!" she moaned. "Oh, my love that looked so perfect and divine! Is this your reward?"

"Stay," he cried, springing forward to her side. "At least, hear before you judge. There are circumstances—reasons——"

She dropped her hands and faced him with a gesture of disdain. "Reasons!—reasons for betraying faith—reasons that

make a lie more honourable than truth; if so, they are for other women than myself—I who gave you all, and whom you have wronged without remorse."

"I loved you," he muttered, hoarsely. "And you told me I made your happiness, and after all it was your own imprudence that compromised your name. After that night in Rome every one talked of you, and Brandon—your friend—made me swear to marry you. I thought you would never know of—of this; but that arch-traitor has deceived me."

"Oh, cease!" she cried, wildly. "All the excuses, all the pleas—what can they be to me now? I only see myself fooled, shamed, dishonoured by the man whom alone in all the world I loved and believed. If you had trusted me—if you had told me——" her voice broke. "At

least then I could have chosen my own lot," she wailed. "Now you are another's, you are not mine; you can never be mine again."

"I can—I will!" he cried, passionately. "I cannot lose you—I will not give you up. You are everything to me, and she——"

He shuddered, but Corinna only drew her skirts away from his clinging hands, and looked at him in horror.

"She is your wife," she said. "Your place is with her."

"My wife!" Loris raised himself and laughed aloud. "You mistake; she is a mad woman, and Garishka is her prison!"

CHAPTER IX.

"And when one loves——"

AFTER those last words there was a long silence. Corinna sank down on the couch by the window and covered her face with her hands. Loris stood at some distance from her, watching her with mingled shame, terror, despair. It seemed to him that he had never loved her as he loved her now, nor ever fully realised how base and cowardly he must look in her eyes.

"Will you hear me?" he said at last. "What this priest told you is in

a way true, but I was only a young, hot-headed boy when Nadia Kovalenska came to us, and we were always thrown together, and in a rash moment I agreed to her wishes, a secret marriage. She was always strange; a beautiful creature, but wild, impulsive, and passionate. But not till we had been wedded for some months did I find out the true cause of her wild outbursts and excitable temperament. Then the horror and shock of it came home to me one night when I woke from sleep to find her standing beside me, a dagger in her hand, its point at my throat. Strong man as I was, it took all my power to master her, and when I listened to her ravings, her fearful words, all the horror of the situation came home to me. I saw I had bound myself for life to a maniac

—forged for myself a chain that only death could sever. I kept my secret till I could keep it no longer, then I went to the priest Ivan and told him. I expected help—pity—consolation. I received none. This man had himself conceived an intense passion for Nadia, and affected to believe my accusations were only excuses to rid myself of her. Russia is full of superstitions, and in many places lunatics are considered holy people and worshipped as saints. Nadia knew this well enough, and with strange cunning gave out that she had bound herself by sacred vows neither to wash, nor eat at table, nor even change her apparel. In my disgust and wrath I thought only of preserving my secret from the world. I set apart some rooms for her at Garishka, gave her two strong,

able-bodied female attendants and left her. I became a wanderer, I hated my country—hated its policy, its superstitions, its tyranny, its injustice. Once only I went to see the wretched being who held my life in bondage. She was worse, much worse, but the priest in his infatuation declared that time and care would cure her mind, and was unwearied in his ministrations. He warned me that as long as she lived I was not free to contract any other alliance. We had hot words and parted in anger. I could not hold myself bound to a loathsome imbecile, a creature whom I shuddered to behold. Again I left Russia, and years passed by. Then I met you. I was so heart-weary, so sick, but when I gazed on your face, Corinna, it seemed as if youth and hope came back to me, as if

life once more held the promise of peace and love. We talked of friendship, you know, and that word lulled me to rest. I said to myself, 'here is a woman, beautiful, gifted, refined; her companionship will atone to me for all my previous misery.' Then the truth dawned upon me. I had known so many women, but none like you. And gradually you seemed to hold all my life, and I was never happy save in your presence."

His voice broke, he sighed heavily. Corinna sat there in the same attitude, giving no sign that she even heard this tale of weakness and remorse.

He resumed. "Then there came that night in Rome, and my visit and your detention of me. I knew then you loved me, or you would not have risked honour, repute, your good name to shield me from

some imagined danger; and, knowing that, I forgot all else. Oh, my love," and he came and knelt at her feet, and tried to draw her hands into his own; "is life after all worth holding without each other? is any union worth the name that does not mean heart to heart, and soul to soul, as ours has done? Have we not been happy? Can any other be to you what I have been, or to me what I know you to be? Shall paltry human laws divide us now? I have erred; I have deceived you; but would you have been happier to know the truth when that truth might have parted your life from mine? And if honour was so much to you why did you imperil it for my sake when there was no need?"

Her hands dropped. Her eyes looked

in tearless misery back to the passionate pleadings of his own.

"I imperilled it to save your life. What have you made of mine?"

"I deserve your reproaches," he said, humbly. "But—I cannot understand—to save my life. How could that be endangered?"

"I received a warning. It was from some Italian boy to whom I had once rendered a service. There was a plot against you. What, I know not, but had you gone to the Embassy ball you would have been assassinated."

A great dusky flush crept over his face. Ashamed, contrite, he bent his head till it rested on the clasped hands lying idly on her lap.

"So great, so noble," he cried, bitterly,

"and how I have wronged you. You will never forgive——"

"It is not that," she said, sadly, "it is to know you are not what I thought you were, that is the hardest part of all. I pity you, for your fate is very sad; but you brought it on yourself even as you brought this."

He was silent. The colour faded from his face.

"Do you not believe I loved you, and when one loves——"

She interrupted him with a gesture. "Love, ah, what is that without honour, without truth, without perfect trust? And all these things I gave you, and you have flung them in the dust as if they were worthless and of no account."

"Ah," he said, petulantly, "I am not of marble or clay, and you are a woman

who cannot understand what the strength of a man's passion may force him to do. Although you loved me, had I told you this you would have left me—I should have lost you."

"But at least I should have held you in reverence; I should have pitied without condemning you. And now you will lose me more irrevocably, for falseness and love cannot dwell together, and you can never again be to me what once I thought you."

"What will you do?" he asked, coldly.

"Bear my life as best I can," she said, sorrowfully, "but bear it—alone. What else remains for me?"

Something in her face, her voice, touched him as nothing had done yet. "Would to heaven I had died before I

had done you this wrong," he cried, and the scorching tears sprang to his eyes and shut her out from his sight.

She rose to her feet then, and a low cry of anguish escaped her. "My love! My love!" she wailed. "Don't think me hard. Indeed, with all my soul I pity you; but what can we be to each other now?"

He turned and caught her in his arms, and she lay there sobbing like a weary child. Yet she knew hope was dead within her, that all her dreams had perished.

"*Must* we part?" he whispered, holding her closely there to his throbbing heart. "What is the world to us? And after all, no one will know, and you are my wife in God's sight, you, and not that other. Why, if you could see her, Corinna, you would say it was a mockery, a sham,

to give her that title. A foul, grovelling creature, who tears her clothes to rags, and sits mouthing and muttering in a corner of the room with less of intelligence or sense than a brute beast. And for her, you would sacrifice our two lives now?"

She shuddered. "It is horrible," she moaned like one in pain. "But nothing can make a wrong right."

"There are women to whom love means a nobler self-surrender than you give," he urged; "you are my soul, my better angel. Through you I may rise to higher things, without you I sink into despair. Life is nothing to me unless I hold you as my own. After all we have been to each other can you send me from you now? Did you not promise yourself to me?"

"Do not urge such pleas," she said; she felt pained—humiliated. Even her great love could not blind her to his selfishness; she saw that unless she had strength for both now, she would be utterly lost.

And yet she loved him so, and his words had power to thrill her heart even in this moment of profound self-abasement. She tried to draw herself away, but he held her close, and again and again he urged every sophistry that could extenuate his fault, that might keep her still his own.

"Oh, have you no pity?" she moaned. "Do you not see how I suffer? Can I live with you now, knowing what I know? It would be a sin in God's sight, even if the world were deceived. And it is only because I am at your mercy

that you ask me this. Once you would have deemed such words an insult. Your fate is hard, but look at mine. Now I have lost honour, faith, love, and only shame is left, and it is your hand that offers it."

"But do you not see that if you leave me now, this shame, as you call it, will be on every tongue? All the world will hear you wedded me in Rome, and then—left me. Your case will be worse than if you still give me the right to protect you. I can buy the silence of that cursed priest. No one else knows my secret. And then liberty may come, and all will be safe. Would you condemn us to years of separation and misery when we might he happy still?"

She covered her face, and shuddered away from his arms. For the first time

since his lips had touched her own, she thought of herself before him. She remembered the rights that her womanhood claimed, and was her old proud self again.

"I cannot reason with you," she said, coldly. "You are a man, and a man who holds women as toys for his pleasure, not as reasoning, suffering beings to whom a dishonoured life is worse than any death. I have no desire to upbraid you for the wrong you have done me. Perhaps I showed my love too plainly; perhaps you thought this mockery of marriage would cloak all, when I—at last—heard the truth. But it cannot—for me. The only kindness you can do me now is to leave me. I ask it for the last time."

"But what will you do?"

"I shall live my old life in the old solitude and peace of my youth. I have done with the world."

"And I am never to see you—hear from you—is this your desire?"

"Yes." The word fell from her white lips like a sentence of doom. He moved aside, and stood looking at her in silence.

"It shall be as you wish," he said, hoarsely. "You have chosen your life. I could not have put you out of mine; but with a woman, to love, is always to think of herself first."

It was base, it was unmanly to speak thus, and he knew it, but he was too angry to be just, and conscience stung him with endless rebuke each time he looked at the pure, proud, suffering creature he had debased and ruined.

A faint colour came into her white cheeks at those unjust words, but she felt too weak and broken even to complain. Yet they severed their two lives as utterly as a knife that cuts a cord in twain. How low indeed had her idol fallen!

"I am selfish, no doubt," she said, in a low, broken voice. "I should only call dishonour glory, so that you gave it me to bear. That is love. And you would weary of me, and cast me aside like a broken toy, and say: 'Why did you listen? Is a man ever faithful to the creature he has wronged?'"

"You had better keep those sentiments for your books," he sneered, for now indeed the evil in his nature was mastering him, and seeing how strong she was in her determination, he tried to

wound her through the very love he had once so eagerly sought. "You are acting like one of your own heroines, not like a creature of flesh and blood. Well, this will be a fine experience. Paris will rave of you more than ever, and I—I may go to the devil as fast as I like. It is only you *virtuous* women who know the best way of sending a man there."

Then he saw the horror on her face and in her eyes, and felt abased and shamed in her sight. She reeled, and would have fallen had he not sprung forward and caught her in his arms. "I can bear no more," she said, faintly. "If you have any pity, any mercy left, leave me now."

He placed her on the couch. "Dear, forgive me," he entreated. "I was mad, brutal, I did not mean it. To me you are

always sacred and pure. But the thought of losing you maddens me. At least say I may see you again, once more."

"Yes, yes," she cried, faintly. "Come to-morrow at this time. I shall be better then. I can decide—but go now; indeed I am worn out."

He saw she was indeed spent and faint. He bent down and pressed his lips on hers. "My own beloved," he murmured, passionately, "don't be too hard on me. You are all I have in the world to care for. Say you forgive me before I go."

She opened her eyes and looked at him. So might an angel reproach—so might a woman pardon.

"I forgive you," she said, "with all my heart."

Tears filled his eyes. The grandeur of that forgiveness smote him as no

pride, no scorn, no rebuke had the power to do.

He said in his heart, "She is an angel, not a woman," and then in silence and in shame he passed from her presence without another word.

CHAPTER X.

As a spirit from dream to dream,
As a sorrow from heart to heart.

CORINNA lay on that couch, too wretched for unconsciousness; keenly alive to the necessity of action and the sharpness of pain.

What was she to do now?

"I cannot see him again," she thought, shuddering. "And I must not stop here."

Then she remembered Brandon. He had promised to return, he might come at any moment; she would ask him to help her.

It was strange that at this time all memory of that scene in Rome had passed from her mind. She only thought of him as a friend, some one to lean on—to trust in, to seek counsel from in this dire strait.

She began to long for his arrival. She whose life hitherto had been so calm, and self-controlled, and independent, now felt utterly helpless. But she roused herself sufficiently to leave the couch and smooth her ruffled hair, and try to look more composed. She resolved to tell Brandon as little as she possibly could of what had occurred—only that she must leave Paris, and at once.

While still her mind was in this chaos of confusion Brandon was announced. The first glance at her ghastly face told him something terrible had happened.

"What is it?" he asked, breathlessly. "Has he not been?"

"Yes," she said, and her heavy eyes looked up to his with such dumb, unspeakable misery that his heart ached to see it. "Monsieur Brandon," she added, rapidly, "you promised to be my friend once. I am in need of a friend now. But I cannot explain, I cannot tell you what has happened. Will you help me?"

"As truly as God hears me, I will."

The tears sprang to her eyes. "You are very good," she said, brokenly; "I always knew that. All I can tell you is that I am in terrible trouble. I want to leave Paris immediately."

"Where do you wish to go?"

"Ah," she looked hopelessly at him, and put her hand to her head as if be-

wildered. "I do not know. You must help me."

"Have you no friends? Where is Madame Nina?"

"Nina!" she shuddered. "I could not go to her now! She would drive me mad. I must be alone. I want no one—no one."

"Why not go to your own château?" he suggested, soothingly. "That is your home."

"True." She looked at him gratefully. "I never thought of that. Yes, I will go there. Will you arrange to pay what I owe here?" (she handed him her purse). "I will go upstairs and get what few things I brought. As for trains——"

"I will arrange all that," he said, quickly, "and, Madame, are you sure—

I mean is it inconvenient to settle this, because I will gladly be your banker?"

She shook her head. "No, no, Monsieur; no further obligations, if you please. I have money enough for my journey."

A faint colour had come into her face. The necessity for action roused her dormant energies. She left the room, and Brandon, marvelling greatly what had occurred between herself and Loris Fedoroff, hastened to settle the hotel bill and secure a carriage.

"So that brute has shown himself in his true character already," he thought in his hot indignation. "He must have done something very bad, for Corinna was so devoted to him, and she had such a high sense of duty. I used to think even infidelity would not drive her from his roof. What can he have been doing in Paris—something queer?"

But he said nothing to Corinna.

Arrived at the Gare du Nord, they found a train left for her destination in half-an-hour's time. Brandon made her have some refreshment, and telegraphed to the old servant in charge of the château to send and meet his mistress.

Then he placed Corinna in the *coupé* for "*dames seules*," and stood beside her, longing yet not daring to speak of what was in his heart.

"Will you write and tell me of your arrival?" he asked, hesitatingly. "I am staying at the Hôtel Bristol. I will wait a day or two in hopes of hearing from you. After that I go to Algiers."

"To Algiers? But I thought your home was in England?"

"So it is," he answered, confusedly; "but—well, the truth is I have a restless

fit upon me. I want travel—excitement —life. Not stagnation or the dull round of duties and occupations that befit an English landowner. So I have left the Manor in charge of my brother, who loves hunting and horseflesh as he loves nothing else. And I am going to wander about for a time. But you have not answered my question yet. Will you write?"

"Yes," she said, mechanically, "on one condition."

"Name it."

"You are not to give my address to another living soul."

"If you wish; not even——"

"No—no," she cried, staying his words and shrinking back as if she saw something terrible. "Not to Loris. Never, *never* to Loris!"

With those words ringing in his ears

—with that vision of her white face and wild, terrified eyes ever in his sight, he passed the remainder of that day.

Meanwhile Corinna leant back on the cushions and watched the fading landscape, and the tints of sky and leafage, and wondered was this dull pain in her throbbing temples and aching heart to be her portion always.

Once life had been set to the music of such simple content, but oh! how long ago that time looked now! Could she ever again be glad—glad of the sun that shone on her, the odour of flowers, the million songs of birds' sweet voices, the air which wooed the summer roses, glad of any of the things which make earth fair and human hearts rejoice?

It seemed to her impossible.

Treachery had ruined her life. Love

with cruel fires had scorched and laid waste the pure, fair garden of innocence. "How shall I live and bear it?" she moaned suddenly. "Oh, the emptiness, the weariness, the heart-sickness: and years and years to go on, and I must live through them longing for sight of his face, for sound of his voice, just to hear him say, 'My darling,' as he has said it so often. Was he right after all? Is love like ours a truer union than the laws of man can frame? And oh, if I measure his wretchedness by mine, how he must suffer, my poor love!"

Tears rolled through her clasped fingers. Tears that did her good, though—that relieved that dull, agonised pressure on her tired brain. Already her heart was softening, already she had forgiven the wrong

done her, for sake of the love she bore the wrong-doer.

"I was right to go — right to leave him," she thought as she sobbed quietly there in that lonely *coupé*. "I could not have had strength for another such interview. And yet what will he say, what will he think when he finds I have gone, not even leaving a line of farewell?"

Then she remembered that all her possessions had been left behind her, some in Rome, some in Venice. Her half-finished book—that book where love had lived and breathed from a full and passionate experience, with its hero drawn from her own hero, his pictured lineaments, his fancied virtues — should she ever finish it? Was not her artistic life

dead within her too? Could she ever find pride or pleasure in the work that once she loved so well? Even that too he had killed, slain with the imperious, exulting force of a passion that had drawn her life into his own — taught her to breathe, think, dream but through himself, until now, having lost him, all else seemed also lost.

Like a bird robbed of its wings, so she felt herself robbed of her gifts, her genius, her powers that had crowned her in the sight of the world, and sent her name abroad on the breath of men's praises.

"My life is like a rifled grave," she thought, and it seemed to her then, in those first hours of suffering, that never, never again could it be anything but a dreary, empty, desolate thing—for what

could give consolation for love; such love as she had given and received, and—lost?

On the morrow Corinna, in the shelter and peace of her childhood's home, wrote two letters. One was to Gilbert Brandon, telling him she was safe and well, and thanking him for all his kindness and care. In this she enclosed a letter for Loris, begging Brandon to post it in Paris for fear of the postmark leading to discovery.

That, too, was brief.

"I could not see you," she wrote. "I felt it best to avoid further suffering such as your presence alone can bring me now. I leave you because it is the right, the only thing to do, but my heart aches for your suffering more than for its own. Yet, oh, my love, I forgive you because at least you made me

happy once. On that memory I must live now, for I pray heaven to keep our lives apart. Do not ever try to see me. Do not add to my shame and misery by such entreaties as you uttered yesterday. My life will be like blindness after light, but at least it will be blameless—it will not add to your sin and its own, so heaven grants me grace. And now—farewell."

Some few weeks later there came to her from Venice, all her books and papers and personal possessions.

Loris had guessed instinctively where she was. But he did not write.

Corinna felt ashamed of her own eagerness as she searched among the packages for some scrap, some token from himself. There was nothing.

But in his heart Loris was saying:

"A little time, a few months of loneliness, and weariness, and solitude, then I will seek her again. Will she be so hard then? Something tells me not."

A few days later he left for Russia.

CHAPTER XI.

"More bitter and sad than tears."

OH! the dreariness and emptiness of those first few weeks when Corinna found herself alone once more! Solitude around her, and in her heart a still more terrible desolation.

The old servants had been glad to welcome her. No word had reached them of her marriage, but old Babette, who had nursed her in her infancy and tended her during all her life, noticed a great change in her young mistress. Sometimes she

thought she was going to be ill — she ate so little food, and took so little rest, and had so wild and feverish a look in her beautiful eyes. But Corinna did not fall ill. She was only weary and heart-broken, only fighting out that battle with sorrow, that conflict between desire and abnegation, which is as death's own bitterness to a woman's loving heart.

Her work lay neglected. At times she would turn over the pages and read the commencement of her story, and recall when and how it had been written, till blinding tears shut out the lines and bleared the words, and her head would fall upon the pages and there rest in the fresh abandonment of remembered anguish. Thought and imagination were locked back in their channels, she had lost the power to summon them at will. All the ex-

clusive delight she had felt in her labours had utterly fled. Her heart was as desolate as a landscape over which a great storm has swept.

When all the beautiful and valuable things she had collected in Rome were sent to her, she roused herself to arrange them in her old study. She threw herself into this occupation with feverish haste and eagerness. How many of those dumb things spoke to her of Loris; of long mornings spent with him in criticising and selecting; of his lectures and dissertations on art. And now she looked at the carved cabinets, and the old Venetian mirrors and Urbino plates, on the pictures, and statues, and quaint armour, and old tapestries, and they seemed to her like ghosts of a past life that faced her now, unreal and ghastly as the dead.

The great dusky room in her old château with its one large painted casement open to the green banks and silvery waters of the Oise, looked transformed as by enchantment, and the first gleam of pleasure that had come to her since that miserable night in Venice, was when she looked round on the result of her labours, and thought how artistically perfect the old, beautiful chamber seemed.

"Perhaps, in time, the power will come back to me," she thought, looking with wet, sad eyes at the bound copies of her former books, and then away to that unfinished pile of MSS. on her study table. "I must only wait and hope."

No one came to her. No word of the outer world reached her. The life of those two past years seemed to float further and further away, receding into

a misty dreamland from which only some sudden throb of pain, or maddening yearning drew it back. At times such as these she knew she could never be content. Who can, to whom love has been all in all? What *pot-pourri* of mouldering leaves can be as the queenly blossom we have once plucked and worn?

Then she would stretch out arms empty of her love, and cry to the silence and the darkness: "Give him back for one hour—for only one hour!"

But memory would return with swift retribution, and she would fall on her knees in a paroxysm of shame and terror. "God keep him from my life," she would moan. "I should have no strength to send him out of it again."

So drifted on the weary nights and days, and the summer glory was about

the land, and Corinna could hear the lowing of the cattle, the songs of the birds, the cheerful voices of the peasants in the fields as they went about their daily labours. But life that was so real to all others, still seemed dreamlike, passionless, weariful to her. She was gliding into that dull, morbid condition, when the mind preys on the body, and mental agony threatens to culminate in the overthrow of reason. Weak, listless, spiritless so she would sit and watch the day dawn, or glow, or die ; the moveless burden of her sorrow weighing her whole life down to the dust.

Then suddenly, when hope was at its lowest and her sufferings so near the verge of excess that the strain seemed unendurable, a hope flashed across the darkness of heart and life—a hope—faint,

tremulous, alternating with terror and with joy. That old-world instinct, new every day in woman's nature now, as in the days of Eve, began to thrill the innermost chords of her being, and waken strange mysterious sympathies, and draw her back from madness and desperation, till almost she could cry, "I love life—still!"

She never thought of shame and suffering, of the misery of motherhood when a child's future may bear the blight of sin and reproach.

That capacity for love which is in every true woman's heart, which had been in her own, even though stifled and kept in subjection by the superior force of mental gifts, leapt up again in full warm life, and only showed her the tenderness, the wonder, the completeness which nature breathes into that one most perfect earthly

love — the love of a mother for her offspring.

It was strange as time wore on and hope became certainty, how this one feeling still dominated over the complications such an event would weave into her life.

She was a wife — yet no wife; she would be a mother, yet her child would never know its father's name. But she put all these considerations aside to dwell only on the joy that moved her so deeply. Another soul seemed created within her, the void in her life would be a void no longer.

The throbs of that mother-heart which will beat for all time, were loud enough to stifle any other sound.

If she thought of Loris now, she thought of him as the giver of her coming

consolation—even the sting of his selfish passion seemed no longer to torture, and to wound.

This love at least would be her own —bought with her sufferings, nourished with her life. The child would expiate the father's sin, and bring a heaven of love and peace to her aching heart.

It troubled her no longer that her pen lay idle—her work neglected. She read, and dreamt, and worked with busy fingers. The muse had laid aside her calling and was only a woman after all, and content to be so, since nature is stronger than even the spells art lays upon the soul.

One evening she was sitting in her study in the soft summer dusk, when her old servant Babette came to the door to say a lady wished to see her—in fact, would

see her. She was now coming—following. Her name was——

A low cry cut short the explanation. There was the rustle of skirts, a hurried exclamation, and Madame Nina's arms were clasped around Corinna.

"My very dearest one! my sweet Corinna, and so I have unearthed you at last. I could not rest till I saw you. Have you any idea how unhappy you have made me?"

The touch of that womanly embrace, the sound of the lively, familiar voice unnerved Corinna. She leant her head against her friend's shoulder, unable to answer her greeting.

"Come, come," whispered Madame Nina. "You must not weep. I know you have had trouble. For the matter of that so have I. Did I tell you I was married? Raoul—where is Raoul?"

"Here, my angel!"

The Comte de Chaumont, stout, gracious, smiling, stood in the background, waiting till the volatile little woman's greetings were over. Corinna, at the sound of another voice, drew herself away and looked up.

The Count approached, murmuring conventional and apologetic greetings. His wife soon cut him short.

"I did not wish him to come, dearest one. I know you hate visitors, but he is afraid to let me out of his sight; but we will send him into the garden to smoke, and we will have a quiet talk together. Yes—yes, Raoul, I know you are dying for a cigarette, and Madame Fedoroff will excuse you. We have hundreds and hundreds of things to talk about."

And before Corinna had mastered her

agitation, or could protest against such summary dismissal of a visitor, the Count, still affable, still smiling, had bowed and murmured himself away, leaving his wife victor of the occasion.

"And now," she said, throwing herself down and drawing Corinna beside her, "now, my muse of wonder, what *do* you mean by treating your friends in this outrageous manner? First you married without even taking *me* into your confidence, then you disappear, then Fedoroff flies off to Russia, and by the merest chance I bethought me of your old retreat, and there I find you buried alive, just as you were when I unearthed you nearly three years ago."

"Nina," said Corinna, very gravely, "have you heard nothing? does the world know nothing?"

"My dear," cried the little Countess, wonderingly. "What *could* it hear? You have withdrawn yourself, of course, to write a more wonderful book even than 'Hélène,' and Fedoroff is visiting his sovereign — that is what the world supposes—is it not true?"

Corinna grew very white. "No," she said.

"No?" echoed Madame Nina. "What then?—nay, pardon me, dear, and if you would rather not speak, do not tell me aught. My pleasure at finding you again is enough. How I have missed you, Corinna. And, well—after all, you see, I married Raoul."

"Yes," answered Corinna, with a faint sigh. "I am glad. He was so good and faithful, and you are happy, are you not?"

"Very," answered Madame Nina with sudden gravity. "He is so good—after all it is the goodness, the devotion, one wants in a husband—not the looks. For a lover it is a different matter. But, dear, why are you living here? Do you really prefer it to Paris?"

"I am living here," said Corinna, slowly, "because I am not the—wife—of Loris Fedoroff."

Madame Nina looked aghast.

"*Not* his wife?—good Heavens, Corinna! what are you saying? Why, all Rome knew you were married, secret as it was kept."

"All Rome knew I—thought—I was—yes," said Corinna, with a hot, shamed blush. "But I have told you the truth."

Madame Nina drew a long breath.

"He—he never dared——"

"Hush," said Corinna. "I cannot have other lips blame him. It is a sad story, I cannot repeat it. He—he loved me, and he was afraid to tell me the truth, and, indeed, I might never have learnt it—only—well, some one thought it worth their while to turn me out of my paradise of trust. So I came here—that is all."

"All!"

Madame Nina's face flushed scarlet. Her quick eyes had detected another secret. Could this be Corinna? Corinna the proud—the cold, the pure-souled, gifted creature, who had seemed to belong to another order of woman than the frivolous puppets of Parisian society?

"*Mon Dieu!*" she cried, below her breath. "But you take it calmly. He

has deceived you, ruined you, and now you live here forsaken, and — and — forgive me, Corinna, I see what further trial awaits you. Why, it is shameful—terrible to contemplate. What will you do?"

"Nothing," said Corinna, quietly. "Heaven will console me soon. My life will not be desolate and empty then."

"But the shame, the scandal!" cried Madame Nina, in horror-struck accents. "Good Heavens, Corinna, can you dream still! Can you not see what a catastrophe this will be?"

Corinna shook her head. "I have not sinned," she said, calmly. "And in Heaven's sight I am still his wife—that I must always believe. And for—this——," she flushed all over her pale, sweet face —her eyes grew soft and humid—"for

this I thank God night and day. I should have gone mad, or died else."

Madame Nina looked at her stupefied.

"You always were incomprehensible," she said. "But now——"

She paused. She really did not know what to make of Corinna.

"I dare say it seems strange to you," said her friend, gently. "Doubtless it must. Love is madness, you know, or—self-oblivion. I can forget myself in this hope; it soothed my sorrow when I thought earth held no consolation."

"But the future," murmured Madame Nina. "The future—what will you do? What will the world say?"

"Have I ever cared for the world?" asked Corinna, gently. "Oh, my dear, can you not understand that it is one's own self—one's own conscience that holds the

power of condemnation. With *that* sting, the world's praise is but mockery. Without it, one can smile at the blame—the outcry—the misjudgment. They cannot touch the soul."

Madame Nina sighed hopelessly. "You always were sublime," she repeated, in a despair that was almost ludicrous. "I confess I don't see how a child can be a consolation. I think they are little horrors."

Corinna smiled. Such a smile as the lips of the Christ Mother might have worn when her tender eyes beheld her first-born nestling at her breast. A smile that rebuked the worldly laments of her friend, and brought rare sudden tears into her eyes.

"I confess I do not understand," she said, below her breath. "And have you forgiven—him?"

The flush and radiance died from off Corinna's face. It looked very white and weary now.

"Must one not forgive when one loves?" she answered very low. "And I know he loved me. He was weak, true; but all men are so when they love, and——"

"And women too, I think," interrupted the little Countess, indignantly. "My dear, you are wonderful, but you had better have been ordinary. You have had honour and fidelity laid at your feet, and love wasted like water upon you in your life, and yet you were unmoved and cared nothing, and sent your worshippers away unregretted, and now—for this man who has only given you falseness and faithlessness——"

"Hush!" cried Corinna, imperatively. "It is for my lips to blame him—not

yours. There is nothing to avenge, and I seek no justice and no pity, for his love paid all the debt. He was only weak for my sake. Shall I who tempted his strength upbraid him? And though we are parted now, I know he loves me still, as I love him. Nothing can alter that. And after all life is short, and in Heaven there will be justice—and mercy too."

Her head sank. The twilight shadows covered her in mystic darkness.

Madame Nina rose and knelt at her feet, and her tears rained on the thin white hands she clasped.

"If the world held more women like you," she murmured, "one might believe in the mercy of Heaven. At least there would be—saints—to pray for it."

CHAPTER XII.

All that promising calm smile we see
In Nature's face when we look patiently.
LEIGH HUNT.

MADAME NINA and her husband stayed two days at the château, in accordance with Corinna's urgent request. But when they left, her life went back to its old monotony.

Then some months later her consoler came, and she realised that life was no longer the barren, joyless thing it had so long seemed.

She had explained to her old servants that she had been married and had lost

her husband, and they, bred in loyalty and faith, never thought of questioning the truth of her statement.

At times she told herself she was happy—more purely, richly happy than she had ever dreamed possible. Her child's touch and cry had humanised her, even more than her love for its father. And he was that father's living image. He had the beautiful features and dark soft eyes and curved lips of Loris, and she would sit and gaze upon the baby face in rapturous content, feeling that he had almost expiated his father's sin.

The cold winter days held all the glory of summer for her now. She was never lonely or weary with that precious burden in her arms, with all the countless offices and attentions and discomforts

which motherhood entails. Sometimes she thought to herself, "Ought I to tell Loris?" But the fear of reopening the old wounds, the hopelessness of now obtaining justice for herself, or her child, held her back.

She let the days and weeks drift on, marked only now for her by those changes and gradations in a child's infant life that are so wonderful to a mother's eyes. Every smile, every coo, every note of incoherent sound, was music to her ears. The child grew strong and beautiful. He was some six months old, and still Corinna lived alone in the château, with no companions save himself and old Babette. But now the hours were never long or empty. Hands and heart were full of busy cares.

A year had passed since she had left

Loris. A year, and no word from him had reached her. On the anniversary of that night she was sitting alone in the small *salon* on the ground-floor. The child lay asleep in her arms. It was a chill, damp night in the early spring. All day the rain had fallen heavily, and the windows looking on to the terrace and great neglected wilderness of garden, were all blurred and indistinct.

A wood fire burnt on the open hearth, the light alone illumining the room, and on a low chair before it, she was sitting with dreamy eyes, that now rested on the face of her sleeping treasure; now wandered to the flickering fire flames as they sparkled or fell in changeful radiance.

A strange oppression was upon her to-night. She remembered well what

night it was. She pictured to herself the agony of that terrible time when she and sorrow had first stood face to face — when all life looked blank and desolate beneath the shadow of a broken faith.

Her head drooped. The firelight played lovingly upon the bronze masses of her hair. Her spirit lost sight and sense of present surroundings, and wandered off to the mingled bliss and pain that lay in memory's shadow-land.

So sitting, so dreaming, she never saw a face that watched her through the casement panes; nor caught the passionate, yearning gaze of eyes long lost to her sight.

Deeper and deeper grew the dusk. She bent forward and stirred the smoul-

dering logs; light burst forth and filled the room, and shone upon the burden in her arms. The watcher started as if stung—then flushed from brow to chin, and a strange joy seemed to thrill his heart's core and set his pulses leaping. His hand pressed the casement. It yielded — opened. He was in the room.

The rush of cold air heralding his approach, touched Corinna's cheek as she bent over the flushed face of the sleeping child. She turned—looked—and all the blood seemed to freeze in her veins, and leave her cold and faint.

Her limbs refused to move, her lips opened, yet no words came. He threw himself beside her on the soft rug, and clasped his arms around her, and so drew her to his madly-beating heart.

"My own! my own! Why did you not tell me?" he said.

His voice, his touch, unloosed the floodgates of feeling and emotion; tears rushed to her eyes. Pale as death she rested there, held by his arms, caressed by his lips, utterly powerless and unnerved.

He let her weep. It was not the time for words—yet.

Then, as her sobs threatened to wake the child, he took it from her arms and laid it on the couch on a heap of soft shawls and pillows. Corinna watching him, saw the strange look on his face, the tenderness of his touch, and her tears fell no more. She rose and dashed them aside, and stood there by the carved chimney-piece—waiting.

Loris came towards her. Their eyes met. Neither spoke.

That long look magnetised her. So much it told—so much it promised. The blood began to fly through her veins, her white cheeks flushed like roses, her breast heaved, the breath came quick and short through the pale, sweet lips.

Loris broke the silence first. "Were you glad or—sorry?" he asked.

"Not sorry; how could I be *that*?" she said, in a strange, suppressed voice. "The days were so long and desolate, and I thought my heart was broken. I think I should have gone mad only—he—saved me."

Loris folded his arms upon the chimney-piece and laid his head upon them with a sort of groan. "Oh my love, my love!"

he cried. "This wrong, too, is mine. Do you hate me now?"

"Hate you!" She grew pale again. "How could I do that? He is ours, you know—he binds us for ever, even though our lives are divided. When I look at him I see your face, your eyes; he speaks to me of you, and pleads for you even when I am most sorrowful and most despairing. He gave life back to me when life had grown hateful. I think I am proof against all sorrow now, so heaven leaves me him."

"You are an angel," said Loris, huskily; "but you make me feel a beast."

She shuddered.

"Shall I tell you why I came here?" he went on, passionately. "It was because I could no longer bear my life without you. I never thought it was in me to love a woman as I love you. Away from

you I stagnate; I do not live. Life is only a horrible nightmare—an existence of unsatisfied longing. I think of you—I call on you. I see your face, I hear your voice wherever I go, whatever I do. At night I dream you are beside me, and my arms go forth to clasp you once again, and then—I wake to despair, to madness, to damnation!"

Corinna trembled. Her limbs grew feeble, her heart felt faint with dread. She sank back into her seat and covered her face.

"Do not speak so," she moaned; "do not, I entreat you. I — cannot bear it."

His voice softened. "Is it so hard for you to hear? Then think what it is to endure. There are many days in a year, Corinna, and each of those days has held

twenty-four hours of suffering for me. . . . My life has been in deadly peril. . . . My secret enemies have plotted hard against me; but because that life is so undesirable it is safe—still. Do you remember what day this is? Just a year to-night since you left me. A year we have been apart. I said, 'I will go to her; I will tell her how I suffer. Perhaps she suffers too. . . . . Perhaps——' Ah! love, do I not know you do! When man and woman have been to each other what we have been, they should part never again on earth."

His voice had sunk very low. In the dusky room there was no sound now save the fall of the wood ash on the hearth, the quick beating of their throbbing hearts. Once again he knelt at her feet.

"Ivan Pisaroff is dead," he said, softly.

She shuddered and looked up. "And —she?"

He was silent. "A life like that," he muttered presently, "may drag its days along for half a century. . . . . And that parts us. Is it to part us always?"

"Is that what you came here to ask me?" she said, faintly. "Has this year not convinced you I was right?"

"Nothing can convince me it is right for us to part. My life away from you is only suffering."

"Oh! hush, hush!" she cried, brokenly. "Do not tell me that. Think of what I have to bear."

"I do think of it. I see that you are my wife—the mother of my child—held apart from me by a quibble, a phantasy of men's brains. The love that united us, the love that made us parents, counts for

nothing in your eyes; and life apart is only suffering to us both, and yet you will not end it. Have I not a right to you? Does—*this*—not give it me? If I am not your husband I am his father; he is the first child I have held in my arms, or whose cheek I have kissed, and he is mine and yours. But I did not know of this when I came; I thought I would but say: 'I love you so—I cannot bear my life away from you—oh! have pity, and be mine once more.'"

The chill, the dread, the icy fear were upon Corinna again. This knowledge of his love, this temptation brought afresh into her desolate life, were things almost beyond her strength to combat.

"Have you no thought what it is to love like this?" he went on with gathering passion. "Is it your idea of charity and

honour to take a man's very life-blood and give him in exchange a blank? What is it you fear? That I might change? That I might forsake you? I will take any oath you desire, and, if I am a bad man, as men say, at least I never broke a bond of honour."

Her eyes looked up in silent reproach.

"You deceived me—once," they seemed to say.

He flushed hotly.

"I know; I know," he said, in hurried accents; "but, oh! my dear, I *dared* not tell you then, and if that traitor had not betrayed me, I should be your husband still. I hold myself so now, and will so hold myself till death. I would not touch, or look at another woman; I would not wrong you by an act of unfaithfulness, even though our lives are parted for

ever; and yet you will not believe me. You hold some feminine scruples dearer than the happiness you deny us both."

She trembled visibly.

"Is it fair—is it just—to tempt me thus?" she cried; "now when I am so weak and desolate? Do you not understand that there is something in a woman's heart without which even love is valueless—some God-given instinct that keeps her pure—that she *dares* not trample under foot? Once she does, is there any depth of degradation into which she may not sink? You are a man, and know the world and life—answer that for yourself!"

"But ours is no case of seducer and victim. We were married in God's sight and by due religious offices; and now this frail tie that keeps us apart is almost rent asunder, for my guilt is mine only. If you

would but trust in me, how happy we might be together!"

She raised her head and looked at him in the face. "Loris," she said, "are human laws created only for the innocent —the untempted? Is it not rather for such hours and times as these? A wrong is a wrong, though no living creature save the wrong-doer knows it; and at least, though I have suffered greatly, I have the knowledge that my sin was unconscious. But now I know the truth—now I know that you are *not* my husband, I should but add to your errors by condoning a wrong done to another. And for my child's sake, now, is it not my duty to live purely and honestly? He may be a man some day. I would not have him blush for his mother's name."

Loris was silent.

Right—of course she was right. Had he not always known it, felt it? Before her, all arguments and sophistries seemed base and evil things. It was only when away from that atmosphere of purity and tenderness that he could build up this fabric of argument and persuasion. Yet, like a child's castle of cards, they fell before her words.

Corinna spoke again.

"Sometimes I think," she said, softly, "that if you had been candid with me, if you had told me the truth, I might, that time in Rome, have sacrificed myself for you. I was alone. I had no one to suffer, or be ashamed for me, and I loved you so. I do not know, I might have — yielded; for when one loves all else looks so poor, so valueless, so weak. But when I learnt that you had wilfully

deceived me, that you had done this wrong, had perjured yourself in God's sight, I almost hated you. I had thought you so noble, so great; but I had only worshipped in you an ideal, self-created. Yet when one has given all one's love one cannot recall it. Mine was all yours. Was, did I say? nay, is so still. But now I am only a sad-hearted woman. I have lost the power I once wielded, and the strength and sufficiency of my life have all fled. Still, were I tenfold more unhappy and lonely than I am, I could not forget my instincts, my duty, my obligation to the womanhood whose crown of purity is only too often a mockery in men's sight. I would rather you took my body and slew it by any torture, than dragged my soul down to shame; for sooner or later you would make it a cause of

reproach in my eyes. All men do that, once they have had their will."

"You wrong me," he said, fiercely. "As there is a God above I never would do that."

She smiled sadly. In her heart she was saying: "How many have forsworn that oath!"

There was an angry gleam in his eyes as he looked at her. No woman had held the power over him that this woman did; but no woman had ever made him feel so weak, and base, and unmanly.

"Do you live here quite alone?" he asked, abruptly.

"Yes," she answered; "save for two old servants. But I am never alone now."

Her eyes in their unfathomable tender-

ness rested on the child, still sleeping tranquilly on his pile of soft wraps.

"How strange women are," muttered Loris. "No child in the world could make up to me for your loss."

"No?" she said, dreamily. "Perhaps it is Heaven's compensation for what they cost us. I have bought my treasure dearly."

"And you love him more than—me?"

She coloured hotly; her eyes sank. "That is not a fair question."

The fire flames died down again. He could scarcely see her face. He came a little nearer and stretched out his arms longingly. "Come here," he said. For a moment she hesitated. Then she crept towards him timidly and felt his arms

draw her to the shelter for which her heart had ached so long. He bent down; his lips first touched hers, then rested longingly, thirstily on them, drinking in sweetness, passion, love, life, all that made the sum of his content, the fulness of his remorse.

"My love, my wife! I have wrecked our two lives, and still you say you do not hate me? Oh, why will you not let me atone; why will you not let me take my share of responsibility, duty, penance, with yourself? Corinna, you make life too hard for me. This heart-canker spreads through its aims, its objects; destroys its ambitions, intensifies its woes. Your love is all in all to me. How is it that mine does not content you for any other loss?"

"I do not know," she said, in a low,

shaken voice. "A woman's nature is so different to a man's."

"It must be," he said, "since your child is more to you than its father. What can I do for him, Corinna? You were too proud, too self-reliant to accept anything from me; but the boy—there is his future? You—you are the dearest thing life holds for me, but you leave me desolate. At least let me feel I have eased your burden in some way! He is my son too!"

She paled and shook with inward agitation.

"Do what you wish," she said; "if it pleases you, or makes you happier; only—he must not be parted from me."

"That I promise," said Loris, solemnly.

"And now," she said, looking up in his face, "you must leave me."

His arms relaxed their close pressure. "You choose the empty days, the loneliness, the pain of absence. So be it."

He crossed over to the child and kissed it. Then he stood for a moment and looked round the room with sad, regretful eyes.

"To think," he said, "that these four walls hold all the treasures of my life. Beyond is only emptiness and desolation. Ah, Corinna, when Adam lost Paradise at least his Eve went with him."

"Because — hers — was the sin that drove them thence. I could not comfort you, Loris. I should only be sharing yours."

"I wish you were less an angel and more a woman," he cried, bitterly. "Your notion of honour is a phantom that spoils

life. It gives stones for bread, and barrenness for rejoicing."

"Yet our lives would be harder still without it," she said, sadly, "and you would find it so soon enough, Loris."

He sighed wearily. Again she had vanquished him. Again the fire, and strength, and imperiousness of passion had been overborne and subdued by her purity and single-heartedness.

"You have said 'No' to me to-day," he said in a strange, softened voice, "but I think you will be sorry, Corinna—perhaps to-morrow — when you wake and remember. For I shall go forth into the world a miserable man, and you—you will drag your days on here. Perhaps you will long for my lips, or my arms, or wake in the long nights murmuring my

name, as I do yours, and then you will think, 'I sent him from me.'"

"Ah, cease," she cried, weeping, for his words were too true a picture of what "had been" not to wring her heart with the pain of fresh possibilities. "I will not deny that I shall suffer as well as yourself. But life is full of that; we must all bear our share, and Loris, what I want to say is this. Of your past life I know little, of your country less; but surely you have duties — responsibilities there—your rank supposes that—yet you avoid and neglect them, and declare your life is purposeless. Oh, my dear, my dear, try and live that life bravely, nobly, honestly. Don't make my memory a weight to drag you down to despair. Be worthy of your name, your manhood, so will I again believe in you—so will I

teach our child to reverence and love his father's memory; so will your errors be excused and atoned for, until in God's good time comes peace."

He drew a long, deep breath. All that was best in him her words awakened and stung to life with the shame, new-bought, of his selfish passion.

"It will be but half a life without—you," he muttered, half unconsciously. "I love you so. I love every look on your face — every curl of your hair — every glance of your great deep eyes, that shame me with their dumb reproach. I love you now as I never loved you when first I knew I had your heart. I was proud then of my conquest—self-confident, yet half-ashamed. But now it is your soul —your beautiful nature—your strength and purity that conquer and abase me.

Worthy of you I never was—but at least —now—I may try to be so."

There was silence save for her low, broken weeping. He came to her side once more. He took her reverently, gently in his arms. A tear fell on her brow as his lips touched it.

It was the baptism of a purer, holier love than had yet visited his soul. She was speechless; pain held her dumb, yet in the pain a faint, sweet joy had its birth. Once more her lover was worthy of her love.

CHAPTER XIII.

A NEW AMBITION.

"WHAT shall I do with my life?" That was Loris Fedoroff's one thought after he had left Corinna. Looking back on that scene he wondered how she had conquered him. He had waited a year and then sought her, resolved to bear down all her scruples, to compel her to return to him. He had expected to find her weary, heart-sick; ready to do anything rather than bear this lonely desolation any longer. He had come to her with a heart on fire,

and resolved to claim his own, and now he had left her abashed, ashamed, hopeless.

There comes a crisis in a man's life when he feels that amidst a world of women, *one* alone is worth the winning: one alone is his fate—his heart's desire. When Loris had promised that fidelity to Corinna he had meant it with all earnestness. Fickle, wavering, unstable, so he had been, regarding women as toys for leisure moments, holding them in such light esteem as worldly and world-spoilt men too often hold them; but Corinna had touched a deeper chord in his being than he had ever supposed existed, and its wakened harmonies vibrated through spirit, soul, and sense, lifting him to higher thoughts, inspiring him with purer hopes, forcing him to respect and adore her as one set apart from the

feeble passions and petty vanities of commonplace womanhood.

The knowledge of all he had brought upon her touched him with infinite remorse. He thought of her with his child in her arms, the martyr to his cowardice and treachery, and the thought stung him to despair. He would have given his life now to free her—to set her in honour and innocence before the world that had crowned her genius, but he knew it was too late.

Too late! Oh, terrible words, that hold all the punishment of hell, the pangs of purgatory in their sound; how fully he gauged their depths of bitterness in these hours of suffering and remorse.

And now, what to do?

He looked back on his life—the selfish,

heedless, profligate life of most Russian nobles. He thought of injustice and oppression, of broken vows, neglected duties. True, he had hated the land of his birth, but that gave him no right to ignore the responsibilities attached to his position, to leave his people ground down under the iron heel of unjust stewards, wringing from their labours the means for their lord's pleasures.

No wonder he had had enemies—no wonder that from time to time his life had been endangered by plots and schemes, and beset by mysterious threats and warnings, which he had hitherto ignored and, strangely enough, escaped.

Only on his last visit to the Russian capital a coffin had been placed in his bedroom with the inscription, "For thee." He thought of how he had laughed and bade his

servants take it away and use it for firewood. Only that he was too careless and too indifferent he might again and again have been entangled in petty political plots; but ambition had no charms, and Court life, with its ceremonies and intrigues, disgusted and wearied him.

His life had been purposeless up to now.

Now he asked himself, What should he do with it? Go back to that semi-barbarous palace of the Fedoroffs? Inquire into grievances, alleviate tyrannies, make of those hereditary lands something to be proud of? Would Corinna be pleased then? She had told him once —long ago—that rank should not be the symbol of despotism. She knew that in his land it was nothing else.

Might he do some good—ever so little

—something to show he had not forgotten her words? The first act of self-sacrifice he had ever performed would be to dwell in this wild, dreary birth-place of his, the prison of his youth, the asylum of the mad Nadia.

Should he do it?

He drew a long, deep breath, he looked out on the darkness of the spring night as the train bore him on to Paris. Paris was the city of his heart. It promised him excitement, forgetfulness, pleasure. Should he forego all these, and voluntarily exile himself among incendiaries and assassins, among servile subjects, and discontented rulers, and political agitators?

The thought was odious, repellent; yet, nevertheless, it took possession of him very strongly.

"In all lives there are duties to be

performed," so she had said. "Have you none? Be worthier of your name, your manhood, live nobly, cleanly, honourably, so will I teach your son to reverence his father's name, and love his memory; so will your error be excused and atoned for, until in God's good time comes peace."

He bent his face on his folded arms, and groaned aloud. "It seems too late to atone now," he muttered, "still for her sake I will try."

It would be hard—it would be unpalatable — horrible to him. The long habits of a loose and selfish life are not easily thrown aside, but he nerved himself to carry out this resolution. It seemed to him now—at this time—that no sacrifice would be too great that won a word of approval from her lips, or brought him her forgiveness. "She is so different to

all other women," he thought, and his eyes glowed with tenderness. "She is worth a man's whole heart and life. She compels reverence against one's will. Think what I have made her, yet a thousand legalities could not make me deem her more a wife than I feel she is, and always will be. Oh my love, will Heaven ever give you back to me again?"

As hour after hour wore on his resolution strengthened. His remorse destroyed that baser fire of passion which had run riot in his veins, and led him to plead with Corinna for what now he knew to be only additional sin. He knew the wrong done could never be undone, or the false step retrieved. The fate his own selfishness and weakness had brought on two lives must be faced to its bitter end. Most women would never have forgiven

such a wrong. She had come of a brave and noble race; she had lived so pure and lofty a life, and he had entered that citadel of innocence and laid it waste for evermore.

No wonder that her forgiveness smote him as no reproach could have done; no wonder that that picture of wronged and suffering womanhood was ever before his eyes.

"What I can do, I will," he muttered, still flying on through the gray shadows, his restless thoughts giving him no peace now. "But it will be so little, and I am only worthy her contempt."

CHAPTER XIV.

TWO LETTERS.

SOME months later, when the ruddy tints of autumn lay over the land, Corinna received a letter from Loris, written from his own possessions in the territory of Vologda.

"I have come here," he wrote, "because you said my duties lay among my people. Duties enough there are; but perhaps it will surprise you to hear that the very obstacles opposed to any benefits, or amelioration of suffering in this country, are the people one wishes to benefit. We

have no serfs in Russia now, but we can't get them to believe it. No peasant can possess more liberty than he himself will take. Even an Emperor's ukase cannot prevail on him to do that, and these slow-willed, ignorant drudges seem to have a pleasure in submission of the most servile description. Their spirits have lain for years under the yoke of slavery — the tyranny of centuries has crushed out individual independence. It is natural to them to have masters, to place their necks under the foot of a ruler. I, when I go among them, feel sickened and degraded, for I cannot but own that such submission springs from no personal attachment. It is simply the effect of custom—the inborn faculty for servitude. Under slightly changed auspices our serfs are serfs still, holding a long pedigree of toil and

drudgery, and an inheritance of brute patience and fidelity. Further, to try and awaken other feelings, to rouse a spark of manhood from this drugged content is to make oneself an object of suspicion. Still, having once begun I am determined to go on. I feel I am doing your bidding, that in some degree the sinfulness and purposelessness of my life may be atoned for. That in rescuing even one of these poor, ignorant souls I am pleasing her who set me the task. These are troublous times. The air is rife with discontent. The doctrines of the Propagandists are spreading themselves slowly but surely through the land. And what a land it is! I sometimes wonder what you would think of it. Fancy travelling day after day over vast plains, stretching from horizon to horizon in apparently endless

monotony—gazing over *versts* of unbroken solitude—seeing in some sparse groups of cabins, a village; or in a few decayed houses, and grass-grown streets, a town. That is all I see, and anything like a change or improvement, is looked upon as a daring innovation, which only shocks the prejudices of long years. I am viewed with mistrust, looked upon as an intruder even here on my own domains. How can I combat the universal argument, 'We have been as we are for generations. Why should we change?' Yet, having once set 'my hand to the plough,' I feel an interest in my work. I feel my life has an object in view. I feel, too, that you, my angel, are praying for me, and hoping with me; that gives me courage. I have one request to make. It is that I may write to you from time to time; if only to tell you of my labours,

or to ask of your welfare. And I will promise you this. Here will I make my home—here will I labour, and dwell until you shall will it otherwise. Only let me have a word to bridge the gulf that parts us—a word of you—of our child. There lives not in any language the power to tell you how I love you both, or how my heart yearns for you. But as I have sinned, so will I bear the punishment you deal me. Now, from this distance, I know how wise and right you were. I marvel that you ever found the power to forgive me. But since you told me that, hope lives in my soul again, and inspires me with strength to bear my life, and use it in your service. I have heard of women whom the memory of love has power to enthral, even when love has been a traitor and deserter. I did not believe it. But

now, in you I reverence the highest, noblest type of womanhood, but, one I am the most unworthy to reach. All that you have been to me is my life's sweetest memory. Against your decision I rebel no more. Parted, sundered, so we live; so perhaps we may die; but, oh! love, wife, angel of my dreams, believe in my sorrow, believe in my love, believe that in learning too late what you were and would have been, lies the sting of an undying remorse! To another woman I would not so humble myself, but your worth shames my unworthiness. Another woman would not have forgiven—another woman would have said, 'Go your way; let me forget you ever lived!' But you did none of these, and I sink at your feet abased—broken—conquered. Yet, how I worship you! Don't be angry that I say

this. My heart is too full for silence, and all its thoughts are yours. Whether you send me word of your welfare, or preserve the same silence that marked this last year of pain, I make no complaint. Your will is my law now. O, God! that I had said so before it was too late."

Corinna read these words with wet eyes and aching heart. They were sweet to her and yet full of sharp pain. The child lay in her arms. She bent her head over him, and her tears fell on his bright curls. He looked up at her and smiled with wondering eyes—his father's eyes.

She pressed him to her heart to still its feverish pain.

"My beautiful one; I at least have you," she murmured, passionately. "But he—he is quite alone."

And in her pity she forgot discretion and wrote to him :

"Your letter comforted me. After all, there is no pain to those who love, like the pain of silence and suspense. I am glad for your sake that you have found work—that you will try to live for others. Believe me that is the surest way to win happiness for ourselves. I, too, am trying to throw off this lethargy of grief. Once again I take up my pen, and once again, with halting steps, but still sure ones, the old power comes back to me. In work I may find forgetfulness and peace ; I pray Heaven so. . . . . You ask of the child. He is well, and he comforts me. Shall I say more ? Shall I say that you should thank him for the forgiveness you won ? I told you so before, did I not ? He

grows more beautiful every day; he drives away the memory of those sick hours when I only prayed for death. Now he fills my heart with tenderness and my soul with hope, and when I look into his eyes I see yours, and—I love you still. Oh! I am very weak, I know; but motherhood has made a woman of me, and nature pleads for you against even—sin. I write this on the impulse of the moment, after reading your own letter and steeping my heart in its glow of love. On cooler reflection I might repent—but I don't wait for it. Take my words; take your child's kisses—here—pressed on the paper as I write; and if your life be hard, lonely, self-sacrificing, at least remember it is not—unloved. . . . . I cannot promise to write often, and it would be better if your letters dwelt as much on the details of

your life, as little on the *feelings* of your heart, as possible. When two love as we do, there is greater safety in silence. See how weak I am to betray myself! But, Loris, I seem to feel *now* that I can trust you; so, without shame, without fear, I have obeyed my heart's dictates. And now, farewell."

CHAPTER XV.

"Is the sky blood-red?"

GILBERT BRANDON had gone to Algiers in a fit of desperation —a longing to get rid of that part of his life associated with Corinna D'Avisgnes.

He felt that change, action, excitement, were imperative. All the long calm and content of his life had been swept away on the current of stormy passion, and he only longed to place the barrier of separation between himself and the woman who had destroyed his peace.

Meeting her so strangely in Paris had shown him again how great was his danger — had only increased that inward animosity to Loris Fedoroff, which had first had its issue in a foreseen rivalry.

He had asked nothing of that strange scene. The fact of Corinna's wifehood set her miles apart from his life. He would not have interfered between her husband and herself; he would not even have sought her confidence against that husband, for all the wealth the world might hold. Something had gone wrong—very seriously wrong—that he could see; but what she had not chosen to tell he would never ask. There are such men in the world here and there—not many, for true worth is as a rare jewel—but still a few, with nature's

own stamp of nobility the sign regnant of their every action, with souls lofty and set far above the mean and coarse and narrow-minded creeds of a lax morality.

To men of such minds, life is always more or less hard. It had been so to Gilbert Brandon.

When Corinna's farewell message reached him he read even in those few guarded words fresh evidence of trouble. His heart ached as he thought of her, in her youth and beauty living alone, suffering alone, wronged, disappointed, perhaps misjudged. He would have given his life to help her, but *that* he knew was impossible. She had not given him her confidence, though she had accepted his aid. A word from her would have changed his plans and kept him at least in the same country as

herself; but she had not uttered it. He was a man of strong feelings, but of few words. He held the value of silence and self-restraint very highly. He knew there were things a wife cannot speak of without dishonouring herself. So, sadly and hopelessly he went his way, her letter resting on his heart and its words in his memory.

"DEAR FRIEND,

"I am safe in my old home. For all your aid I thank you. Forgive me that I can say no more, but believe I hold you in grateful remembrance. I pray your life may be happy. It ought to be, for you are a good man. I may never see you again, but I shall never forget your services, your many acts of kindness and unselfishness. Add to them one more—

post this letter for me in Paris. I fear the postmark here may betray me. However strange my conduct seems do not think it is without cause, without grave reasons.

"Always your friend,

"CORINNA."

He had noticed that there was no other signature. But being without a clue to the reason, he had imagined any cause but the right. He only knew that he could not help her, since to a woman separated from her husband, the friendship of any other man is a snare and a danger. He had replied briefly to her letter:

"I grieve deeply for your sorrows. Heaven grant they may pass away in

time. I ask nothing of their nature since you have chosen to preserve silence. I am your friend always; if you ever need me, do not hesitate to apply to me.

"GILBERT BRANDON."

Then he had gone his way; gone to the country that at that time stood most in need of swords and desperate lives, and volunteered his services. A brief experience in a Yeomanry Corps had been all he knew of soldiering. The "real thing" was very different. Toil, weariness, hardship, discomfort—all these he bore, and bore uncomplainingly, because in some measure they brought relief, occupation, forgetfulness.

He was liked, admired, wondered at, for he made no friends and gave or sought no confidences. He found strange

associates. Spendthrifts of many nationalities, wild, heart-sick, desperate, ruined, who had come to the ranks of a foreign army in sheer desperation, or bravado, or indifference. Men who had bet, gambled, or drunk themselves into semi-madness, or fought too many duels, or caused too many scandals; men who had joined from sheer brute love of bloodshed, and preferred the din of cannon and rattle of musketry to any other music in the world.

Among such scenes and such men as these two years of his life had been passed. He was growing weary of barrack-room *argot*, of coarse jokes, and coarser anecdotes, of the scorching suns and arid plains — even of the white, picturesque town with the violet waters of its bay, and its fantastic blending of Gallic and Moorish life.

He would rather have seen the bold sweep of heather-clad moors, and felt the cool, bracing winds of his own north-country air. This glitter and colour, this barbaric mixture of Oriental and European life had lost its charm of novelty. The semblance of warfare which had now degenerated into "potting Arabs," disgusted him.

He was roaming through the Place du Gouvernement at the close of a hot, bright day. The *réverbères* were lit, and the lights fell on all the varieties of life, and brilliance, and picturesqueness that make up the charm of Algiers. But he heeded neither the flitting, shadow-like, Eastern women, with their shrouding *haicks*, the noisy French Chasseurs, nor the brown bare Bedouins, any more than he did the Parisian refuse of boulevard or

café dragging their flowing silken trains through the dusty streets, and laughing in his sombre eyes as musing and neglectful he passed along.

"I am home-sick, I verily believe," he was thinking to himself. "In any case I am utterly weary of life here. I have every excuse for leaving. Wounds, ill-health—shall I take it?"

He seated himself on one of the chairs outside the café. Groups of officers were scattered about, smoking, drinking, gossiping. The burnished moonlight fell on the strange, bronzed faces, and dusty uniforms, all the polyglot mixture which had won for the army of conquerors the name of "sweepings of Europe."

Brandon listened for a while, and the disgust on his face deepened. "After all, war is hateful," he muttered, wrathfully.

"What right had these men to turn the lords of the soil from their own possessions? Undoubtedly they were in the right of the quarrel. I wonder what my brother officers would think if I told them I had often felt inclined to join the ranks of their enemies! My short experience has shown me that they possess a nobility, courage, and fortitude that shames our civilisation. Murderers and pillagers make war, and whole armies steal a continent and destroy its innocent inhabitants, and call it 'glory'! Truly that is a word of wide meaning. On the whole, I am better pleased my enemies wounded me than had I been the aggressor and culprit 'licensed to murder.' 'Tis a strange world, and it is wonderful how we delight in humbugging ourselves!"

"You are thoughtful, *mon ami*," said

a voice beside him; "you have sat there ten minutes with your coffee untouched and your eyes bent on it. Are you still weighing the pleasures of warfare and peace in the balance?"

"No," said Brandon, looking up at the speaker, a captain of Chasseurs, and the only man, among the many he knew, with whom he was on anything like terms of intimacy. "I was only thinking I am sorry now I did not offer my sword to your enemies."

"*Nom de Dieu!* That is a strange fancy, and after all your deeds in our service. Do you think your rewards have been slow in coming?"

"Rewards! I sought none, and have had none," said Brandon, hotly. "I came here in a fit of disgust at life and all belonging to it. I only wanted forgetfulness. I

preferred to seek it amidst danger and death. I know now I was wrong."

"Your country behaved ill to you, then? We are fellow-sufferers," said Paul Ramon. He drew his chair close to the little table, and ordered absinthe, and took out his cigar-case as a matter of course. "But I thought England was always good to her children. It is only the Gallic, and Teutonic, and Slavonic races who tyrannise, and exact, and oppress."

He spoke French purely and rapidly. Brandon's experiences in Algiers had enabled him to acquire fluency in the language also, but his sentences were laboured and slow in comparison to those of his companion. Yet he never had felt sure of the man's nationality. A Frenchman to all interests and appearances, there yet was about him that nameless something

which bespoke the nationality to be one of adoption rather than birthright. Calm —proud—reticent—a gentleman and a scholar, there was little of the excitability and frivolity of his Gallic brotherhood about him. Brandon had liked him and felt attracted by him. Yet through two years of companionship they had exchanged no confidences, nor had either thought of questioning the other as to reasons for self-exile and voluntarily-sought danger.

Are men less curious than women, or do they own some loftier instinct of courtesy, which shrinks from intruding on that privacy of thought and feeling which is the inheritance of sorrow, trouble, or shame?

Be that as it may, these two men had dwelt together, fought together, suffered together, yet never asked each other, "Why are you here? What secret in your

life has driven you to these desperate and reckless ranks?"

"I have no fault to find with England," said Brandon, presently. "Indeed, I am longing to be back in the quiet of my country home. I shall resign, I think. There is no more work to do."

"There will be work to do to-morrow," said Ramon, coolly; "and hot work, if I mistake not. The Chief has had information that fighting has broken out in the interior. We are to march at dawn. Not you, of course—your health exempts you—but——"

He paused abruptly, raised his glass, and drained it slowly. "Did you ever have a presentiment?" he asked, smiling. "Odd things, are they not? Well, you know, I've been in the thick of many a brush here, and never thought of anything

but the wild excitement of the combat—the fierce joy of cut and thrust, when every sword-stroke means a chance of victory or death. To-night when I heard this a strange feeling came over me. Shall I tell you what it was?"

"By all means."

"Before my eyes there seemed suddenly to float a blood-red mist. Look where I might, turn where I would, I saw nothing else." He drew his hand rapidly across his eyes. "It has passed now. But I am as sure as that I now sit here that I shall never return from this skirmish."

"My dear fellow——" began Brandon.

Ramon cut him short. "I know what you will say. It is useless. I am no coward. I do not fear death. But I have a few things I should like to say to you before we part. I have no friends here.

None in the world, in fact. I possess but one relative, and he is not even aware of my existence."

He looked quickly round. No one was within earshot, and no one seemed to be paying any attention to them. He bent a little nearer to Brandon. "I am not a Frenchman, as you all think," he said, abruptly; "I am a Russian—exiled, dishonoured, robbed by the very race I served. I know not what wrongs drove you here, but mine are enough to turn the gentlest soul to fury. My father was a Russian noble; of my mother I know nothing, save that she died at my birth, and she was—not his wife. I was reared as a peasant, but in my veins ran blood too fierce and free for bondage. I found out who my father was, while yet a lad. Barefooted

and alone I tramped the country till I reached the Russian capital, and found him and told him my history. Shame and fear of discovery—for he had then wedded a noble lady of the Court—made him seek to conciliate me. I promised secrecy if he would give me education. I sought nothing more at his hands. He did this, and our lives were passed apart. I was only an encumbrance, a shame, a disgrace. I knew he had another son — heir to all the honours and advantages the law denied me. My wrongs made me bitter. Education, opening my eyes and sharpening my brains also made me an easy prey for agitators and conspirators, for those secret enemies whose power is now a thing of awe and wonder. I entered the army by my father's influence. I was dismissed from

it by—my own folly. I escaped into France. From there I came here. A price was set on my head, and I knew my fate if ever I was discovered. But my friends were powerful, and I have been unmolested. That is my history as briefly as I can tell it. But those who are friends to me are enemies to the one living member of my father's race; on whom I have no claim of brotherhood — to whom my very existence is unknown. He has led a careless and dissolute life; he has been unmindful of his people and neglectful of his duties. I have reason to believe his life has been in danger often. But he lives still. I have thought at times I should like to warn him — to tell him of my history and of those who will avenge it sooner or later. He is young, and life no doubt

looks hopeful and desirable to him. It has never done that to me. I have told you this to-night, because as surely as I tell it, I feel it will be my last opportunity. I have known neither love nor friendship in all these years of exile; but I feel as if you were more nearly my friend than any of those I have known far longer. I want you to do me a favour. Come with me to my rooms. I will place in your care a sealed packet. If my fancy turns out to be only a fancy, you can return it to me when I claim it. If, on the contrary, this presentiment is verified, I want you to open the outer covering and send it to the address marked. If you go home, as you say, I should esteem it a still greater favour if you would take it with you to the address

in Paris that I will give. It is more certain than the other. But this may be as you please, or circumstances of your journey determine. Will you do this, or am I asking too much?"

"I will do it with pleasure," said Brandon, gravely.

"And you will come with me to my rooms?"

"Most certainly. But now I have something to say in my turn. I shall apply for permission to accompany you on this expedition."

"Brandon!—impossible in your state."

"State or not, I will go. A parting brush won't harm me, and this tribe you mentioned is one of the most lawless and troublesome of the lot. Come; we have no time to lose."

They both rose. Ramon's eyes looked

gratefully, wonderingly at the man whom he had always deemed so cold, and callous, and proud.

"*Mon Dieu!* but you are strange, you English," he muttered, under his breath. "Do you care so little for your life, then?"

"Not much," said Brandon, with a faint sigh. "Besides, I want to see what a presentiment is worth. I want to hear you laughing with me round the camp fire tomorrow night when you recall your foolish fancy. Why, Ramon, man alive, what is it?"

The man had stopped, and was gazing wide-eyed, deadly pale, at the clear violet sky, all lustrous now with stars and moon.

"The sky," he muttered hoarsely, seizing Brandon's arm. "You see it?"

"Of course I do," said the Englishman. "What of that?"

"It is blood-red," cried Ramon, covering his eyes and shuddering. "The second warning. Will there be a third, Brandon, do you think?"

CHAPTER XVI.

A LITTLE HOPE TO GILD THE GRAVE.

BRANDON had his way.

In the dawn of the African morn he was riding over the hot, stretching, arid plains where the French encampment had been surprised by the enemy. A scout from an outlying picket had brought the news, and a large detachment had been immediately sent from Algiers. The audacity of the attack, and its unexpected treachery had roused general indignation. The French general had received Brandon's application with surprise,

but cool heads and brave hearts were only too valuable in such an emergency. At the head of some of the picked men of his regiment, and side by side with Paul Ramon, he rode now—weakness, fatigue, distaste, all temporarily forgotten in the flush and fervour of a new excitement.

Ramon seemed as cheerful as himself. His presentiment had not affected his spirits as yet. They pushed on with all possible speed, for help was urgent, and the danger to the Frankish camp imminent.

Some few hours after dawn they came in sight of the scene of action. The French force consisted mainly of a branch of the main body, without artillery. But they had held their own bravely against the superior numbers of the foe. When the reinforcements came in sight the battle was raging at its fiercest. The Arab line seemed

to have hemmed in the French squadrons completely. It was almost a hand-to-hand conflict—a *mêlée* of rearing chargers, and wheeling sabres, and flashing bayonets, as Zouaves, Turcos, Tirailleurs, and Bedouins charged and met in that hideous strife which has for its watchword—Glory!

"Not a moment too soon," muttered Brandon, as with scarce a second's delay the blast of a trumpet rang out over the din and carnage of the blood-stained plain, and the word "Charge!" sent the relieving squadrons headlong to the rescue. On, on, over the corpse-strewn field, over the dying chargers, on with the lightning fire of swords and lances flashing in the sunlight, on amidst clouds of smoke and hail of musketry, with faces set in the rigid desperation of battle lust. The Arabs halted in the midst of the carnage,

startled and confused. That instant's hesitation lost them the day. The sense of near relief gave courage and strength to the weary forces hemmed in there like cattle waiting slaughter. Their drooping energies revived. They charged blindly forward against the dark, close ranks. The Arabs, hemmed in front and rear, made a brief resistance. A struggle hot and fierce, the struggle of men desperate to death, and then—retreat.

For a moment Brandon drew rein and glanced around. Confusion, turmoil, din, the shrieks of the dying, the hoarse shouts of victory, the lifeless forms of slain hundreds greeted his sight and hearing. A short distance from him two dark, fierce-looking Bedouins were engaged in a hand-to-hand conflict with a Frank. As his eye caught sight of them the horse of

the latter fell to the ground, bearing his rider with him.

The dark faces were full now of deadly meaning, of bitter hatred. Vengeance was their right, and with savage ruthlessness they stooped over the fallen man.

Two swords swooped down thirsting for life blood. One was struck aside with a force that sent the Arab reeling in his saddle; the other——

As Brandon caught sight of the fallen man's face he threw himself from his horse. "Is it you, Ramon; are you hurt?"

The Russian rose to his feet feebly. His horse was dead; he staggered against Brandon; his hand covered his eyes. "Blood everywhere," he muttered. "I see nothing else."

"Come, cheer up," cried Brandon, cheerfully. "The day is ours. The enemy

is in full retreat. Did that brute wound you?"

"I fear so," said Ramon, faintly. "His sword went through my chest."

Brandon tore open his coat. It was soaked with blood. A Turco was passing. Brandon called to him for assistance. Together they lifted the wounded man and bore him to a distance from the scene of carnage.

Afar the Arabs were flying over the dusty plain pursued by triumphant foes. Brandon kept his own men back. The day was won. Of what use was further bloodshed? Cruelty and heroism were two different things. The old feeling of weariness and disgust was upon him. The sight of those motionless forms, those cold, stiff hands clenching the desert sand in Death's last agony, those dark, stern faces turned

upwards to the blue sky and the golden sunshine made his heart sick within him.

"I am not of the stuff for a soldier," he thought, as he rode beside Ramon towards the encampment. "I will have no more of this."

The blood flowed from the breast of the wounded man whom he half supported in his arms. His eyes were closed now.

When they reached the camp and sought the surgeon's assistance he was insensible.

The doctor looked at him critically. Then he shook his head. "He has not an hour to live," he said.

Brandon shuddered. Had the presentiment been worth something after all?

The wound was dressed, but he was dying from inward hæmorrhage. The Arab's sword had pierced his left lung.

Brandon sat beside him—pitiful, watchful, heavy-hearted. He might glide into death without ever recovering his senses; and he was alone in the world and almost friendless. He resolved to watch him till the end.

The sun rose higher in the heavens. The heat of the scorching day was at its greatest. He moistened the lips and temples of the dying man from time to time. The leaden hue he knew so well was creeping over the bronzed face, the heart-beats grew feebler and feebler. Brandon leant over him at last and spoke with some faint hope of recalling consciousness. At his voice the glazed eyes opened, the pale lips moved. The hand he touched stretched itself feebly towards him. "Thanks, friend," he muttered. "The — papers — your promise. You will not—forget?"

"I will not forget," said Brandon, hoarsely.

The dull eyes closed. The feeble hand went up to his throat. Brandon, thinking he needed air, unloosened his shirt. As he did so he saw the glitter of a very fine silver chain. From it was suspended a tiny cross. He placed this in the weak fingers, and saw the dying man raise it to his lips. Then he signed to him to remove it. "Keep it," he murmured, faintly, "for my sake. It is all I have—my father's name——"

Then his head fell back—his eyes closed.

Life and glory were ended things for him.

Brandon laid him gently down. His heart felt sad and oppressed. He rose

to his feet, and stood looking down on the lifeless clay. Then he bowed his head over the cross in his hand—a prayer escaped his lips. "God grant he is at peace."

With those brief words he turned away. He looked at the cross and the chain, and was about to thrust them in his breast. The light fell clear and brilliant on the words engraved on the little iron symbol—the symbol that no Russian, poor or rich, is without.

The name engraved there was "Paul Fedoroff."

CHAPTER XVII.

"I am a miserable woman."

IF Gilbert Brandon had needed an incentive to resign his post in the Algerian Cavalry, he found it on his return to the town.

A letter from Corinna awaited him—the first he had seen since he left France. It was brief enough to alarm him.

"I am in sore trouble—I need a friend—a *true* friend. May I claim your promise now? If so, come *at once*."

That was all. But it was enough—

more than enough. With all the speed that he could command—with his dead comrade's papers safe in his keeping, with but few regrets and brief leave-takings, Brandon saw the white villas, and thick-foliaged hanging gardens, and brown, rugged mountains fade from sight.

He stood on deck in the red light of the after-glow as it flushed the violet waters of the bay. Heavy-hearted he had first gazed on that beauty—heavy-hearted he watched it fade and die, as twilight, like a gray shadow, glided over earth and sea, and night—radiant, star-studded, as only Eastern night can be—shone softly in its place.

A woman's power had sent him thither —a woman's voice recalled him. He had come with little zest, he left with little regret. Nothing in those years of silence,

separation, danger, had brought forgetfulness, though now he had taught himself to accept hopelessness as a duty.

Often and often he had hoped to look on her face, to hear her voice, but he knew that of his own free will he would never satisfy that longing. And now she claimed his promise, and as a friend he must meet her, serve her, help her, yet never seek reward.

It was no light task he had set himself, and he knew it. But his heart beat with too loyal a love, too unselfish a devotion, to allow of an instant's hesitation in the matter.

"It is enough to make one believe in fate," he thought to himself, as he paced the deck in a restless fever of impatience, for his eager longing outstripped all speed of steam and sail, and only showed him

afar off that pale and suffering woman who needed him. "To think that the only friend I made here should come of that cursed stock. Perhaps the secret enemies he spoke of have taken vengeance on Loris, perhaps——"

A hot flush rose to his brow. Even to himself, he could not follow out that thought.

"No," he cried, fiercely, "not *that*. Were she free she would never claim my aid. Of that I am sure. It must be something else."

Arrived in Paris he left the packet at the address given on the second wrapper. Then, without further delay, he set out for the château of Corinna.

It was sunset when he arrived. The château was some leagues from the station,

and no conveyance was procurable. Too impatient to delay his arrival a moment longer than was necessary, he set out to walk the distance.

It was quite dark before he arrived there. He looked up at the gloomy old building and shuddered. The autumn mists were creeping up from the river; a chill wind moaned amongst the leafless trees. The gate swung on its hinges—no one had fastened it for the night. Entering and closing it after him, Brandon walked up the path, and came in sight of a lighted window opening on the terrace.

He hesitated, then advanced towards it, and looked in. He saw a small room dimly lit by fire and lamp. In a chair by the hearth a woman sat with her head bowed on her hands; at her feet, on the rug, lay a little child. He

was covered with a shawl; his head lay on a cushion. The attitude was singularly weary and listless. Brandon's heart seemed to stand still.

Was Corinna a mother? The idea was so strange, so unexpected a one, that it seemed to stun him for a moment. He leant against the wall, and sought to steady and control himself.

Then he groped his way to the entrance, and rang for admission. An old woman answered the summons, gazing curiously at the intruder. Brandon scarcely noticed her. He bade her take him to her mistress, and she obeyed. Probably he was expected, since she made no comment on his advent, but led him straight into the presence of Corinna.

Corinna! Was this Corinna—this pale, haggard woman, who sprang to her feet

and faced him with sad, despairing eyes? This, the radiant, beautiful creature he had known but a few years before, bearing her crown of honour so humbly, scarce conscious of her gifts of womanhood, or dower of genius?

A mist seemed to float before his eyes, and shut her out. Her hands touched him, her voice welcomed him, but he could have thrown himself at her feet and wept like the weakest woman, she was so sadly, terribly changed.

With a supreme effort he choked back the emotion that threatened to overpower him. He took the seat she offered, and keeping his eyes averted, said huskily:

"I received your letter in Algiers. I was on the point of coming back. Tell me what I can do for you."

"My true friend," she murmured, grate-

fully. "Indeed I have no words to thank you. I ought not perhaps to have written, but I was desperate—frenzied. Oh, what these months have been to me!"

Her voice broke into a sob. She crossed the room, and going to a small cabinet, took from it a paper.

"Read that," she said.

Brandon obeyed. The contents were as follows:

"MADAME,

"Count Fedoroff was seized and carried off last night by a party of Russian police who have for some time had him on their list of 'suspects.' The action speaks for itself. I who write this am his secretary; the one man he trusted here where he has worked so nobly and suffered so unjustly. For some time past

he has been uneasy and dispirited. A few weeks ago he said to me: 'Michael, if anything should happen to me write to the address of this lady (your nobility), and tell her of my fate. She is a friend who once loved me dearly; she will be sorry, but my death will serve her better than my life.' So I write to you, gracious lady. My lord is not dead, but a fate as terrible may be his. Perhaps you are great or powerful, or have influence to make these great ones listen. From us, his people, all appeals are useless. If your nobility will do what you can many hearts will bless you; many lips will pray for you. If you can do nothing, we swear by St. Peter, St. Alexander, St. Nicholas, and all the holy saints, whose names be blessed, that we

shall avenge our master's fate, or—share it.—Your nobility's humble servant,

"MICHAEL VARISHKIN."

The letter dropped from Brandon's hand.

"What have you done?" he asked, abruptly.

"Nothing," she said, turning her white face to him. "What could I do? Then I thought of you, and made that appeal. I had no right, no claim, but I was well-nigh desperate, and there was no one—no one. Sometimes I thought I would go myself to the Emperor, and appeal to him, but how could I travel so far alone, knowing no word of the language, and the child is so young?"

"He is — yours?" asked Brandon,

abruptly. "Why was his father not with you?"

A dull, red flush crept over her pallid face. Corinna's eyes sank.

"I forgot you did not know," she murmured. "We are separated."

"Separated!" gasped Brandon. "He has left you—his wife—the mother of his child, and you ask me—*me!* to serve you in this matter. My God, Corinna, there are some things that flesh and blood can't stand! Do you forget I too loved you? and now I see you cast aside, sorrowing, deserted. No, I *will* speak! Heaven knows I reverenced you as I might an angel of God's sending; but I cannot sit tamely by, and see your life going to wreck and ruin at the will of a selfish brute like——"

"Oh, hush," she moaned; "you will kill me!"

Her cry broke down his anger. Pity once more took its place.

"I forgot," he said, hoarsely; "he is your husband, after all. Of course he is sacred in your eyes, even though he ruins your life and mars your happiness. Some women are so. But I think you stretch your loyalty too far."

Again that flush crept up to the blue-veined temples, again the great, sad eyes sank abashed before his searching gaze.

"You are keeping something from me," said Brandon, sternly. "Before I give my aid, I will know all the truth. Why did he leave you?"

She shivered and threw herself down on the rug beside the sleeping child.

"Oh! I am a miserable woman," she moaned. "I was so proud once, so

happy, so content; and now—now I envy the very peasant who labours in those fields. Her life, at least, holds no reproach, no shame; but mine——"

Her voice broke into passionate weeping. The child stirred and opened his eyes and stretched his arms towards her. She snatched him to her bosom. Her eyes looked up amidst their blinding tears to the pitiful face above her.

"See what Love has done for me!" she cried. "I have been deceived, wronged, shamed in all men's sight. I am not Loris Fedoroff's wife!"

Brandon stood like one stunned. The room and its shadows seemed to reel about him.

"What do you say—are you mad? *Not* his wife? Did he break his oath to me—did he dare——"

She bent her head once more.

"He kept his oath to you," she said. "I would to Heaven you had never asked it. He had to choose between treachery to a man, or—a woman. Do you need to be told which course he took?"

"He deceived you? But I cannot understand; your marriage was known to all Rome."

"Twenty ceremonies could not have made him my husband," she said. "He had a wife in Russia, a poor creature who had lost her reason, whom for years he had not seen, yet who was what I deemed myself. That is all. I never meant to tell you. You will be hard on him, I know; and you are so strong and brave, and Love could never master you. But I—I love him still; I shall always love him. And this is my child and his, and

so I ask you to pity me and help me, for in all the wide world I have not a friend to whom I can turn, save yourself!"

The despair in her voice, the anguish of her changed face, pierced Brandon's heart like a sword. He could not speak. He could frame no words then that would not have cursed her wrongdoer as his vilest foe. But her love held his name sacred. The fire of motherhood burned clear and steadfast in the eyes whose tears of sorrow seared his very soul. With a stifled groan he turned aside, and buried his face on his folded arms.

There was a long silence. It seemed to Brandon as if he were the victim of some nightmare, as if this story he had heard could not be true. He thought of the reverence in which he had held this woman, the loyal worship which he had given her

from the hour they met, and it had all been as nothing in her sight. And this man who had dared to offer her so dire an insult, who had dragged her down from her throne of purity, who had crushed all the beauty and fragrance of her life as he might have crushed a flower that was worthless, this man she loved.

His hand clenched in fiery wrath. Never had he hated Loris Fedoroff as he hated him now—now when he looked at her there, with her child clasped to her breast.

"She will never forget, she is not like most women," he said, in the bitterness of his heart; "therein lies the sting of his crime."

She raised her head at last and looked at him. "I know you are sorry for me," she said, sadly; "but I have not been alto-

gether unhappy. We parted as soon as I learnt the truth, and I know he would have given his life to undo the wrong. But it was too late. That time in Paris —that was when I found it out. Then I came here as you know. It was all so terrible at first. I thought I should die or lose my reason, and then my child was born, and I was almost happy. That seems strange to you, no doubt; but what man can understand what her child is to a woman? And he was Loris's son, and Loris had been my husband. Nothing could alter that to me. The deceit was on his part. I had not sinned knowingly. So I lived on here. No one knew my secret except Nina, and she would never betray me. At times I was almost happy."

"And Loris, did he know about the child?" asked Brandon, huskily.

"Yes, he came here once. It was after we had been parted a year. Then he went to Russia and lived on his own lands, and only now and then he wrote to me. I was growing almost content. In this quiet retreat it mattered little what the world said, and my mind grew calm, and I had my work, and the child. Then came this news. It was terrible!"

The burning red stained her face once more. She rose, the child still in her arms; her eyes, bright and feverish, looked appealingly at Brandon's stern and colourless face.

"I told you before I was nearly desperate. Then I remembered you and your promise. You were always so good to me, and I knew you were brave and strong. I said to myself: 'He will help me.' For my own life I care so little; but Loris—oh!

I cannot bear to think of Loris, tortured, exiled, suffering in that cruel country! I must find ways and means to save him. And you—you will not refuse your aid, will you? For his child's sake, for my own, I ask it."

Brandon drew himself up to his full height—his eyes blazed with bitter wrath. All the passion of his pity for her seemed frozen and hardened in his breast.

"It is well you ask it for *your* sake," he muttered. "But it is a hard thing. I would rather take his life than save it. What he suffers he richly deserves."

"Ah, no, no," she cried, passionately. "If I can forgive, surely no one else has a right to resent."

A chill smile crossed Brandon's lips. "A love that is loyal, and faithful, and unselfish may be poured out thanklessly

at a woman's feet, and for treachery and desertion she gives such fidelity as — this! Truly your sex may well be called incomprehensible!"

She grew very pale. "Do not think me ungrateful," she said, in those low, sweet tones that smote his heart as with remembered pain. "I loved him. I shall love him always. Nothing can alter that. He holds my life with his—if he dies I shall die. I thought my child was all in all, but when I heard of Loris in danger —suffering—torn from home and friends—all my heart went out to him. I have sent for you. I have told you all. I only ask now—can you help me? If you cannot I will go to him myself."

She spoke wildly, desperately. Her frame shook with a passion of emotion, her eyes gleamed with inward fire.

Brandon approached and took her gently by the arm, and seated her on the chair once more.

"Do not distress yourself," he said, gently. "You have suffered enough. I will help you with all my power and will."

Then her strength failed. Her head fell back. White and senseless she lay against the cushions, while Brandon, in an agony of fear, snatched the child from her arms, and rang for assistance.

The swoon was but brief; she soon recovered. Nor would she go to bed, but insisted on sitting up and sharing the meal prepared for her guest.

It was nearly midnight when Brandon rose to seek the room prepared for him. He, too, was fatigued and spent.

As he was crossing the corridor one

of the doors opened, and the old woman Babette looked out.

"*Pardon, M'sieu.* I thought it was my mistress. I have not liked to disturb her, but the child seems so ill to-night, and he cannot sleep."

"Is he there?" asked Brandon.

"Yes, M'sieu. I brought him to my room because Madame has had so many bad nights with him already. Only he seems to me worse to-night."

She drew aside, and Brandon entered. He went up to the little bed and looked down at the child. His face was very flushed. The eyes looked languid and yet sleepless beneath the half-closed waxen lids. The pretty rosebud mouth was drawn into a pathetic line of pain; the little hot hands lay nerveless on the coverlet. Brandon knew nothing of children or of

children's ailments, but something in the look—the listless attitude—struck him with a sudden fear.

"Have you had a doctor?" he asked, abruptly.

Babette explained that there was no doctor in the village, none nearer than the town of B——, and Madame had not sent for him, though the child had been ailing many days—always thinking he would get better.

"It is the fever, I think," she went on, rapidly; "there has been so much of it in the village this autumn, but Madame thinks he is teething, and will soon be better. He was always delicate, the little angel. I have always thought him too patient and too good. Myself, I prefer them troublesome; one knows they are healthy then."

Brandon paid little heed to her chatter. His eyes were riveted on the baby-face that bore its father's lineaments with so startling a distinctness.

"Can I have a horse—here," he asked, abruptly, "or from the village? I will go to B—— and fetch the doctor. There is no need to disturb your mistress. Tell her nothing; she is ill and worn out, and has sought her room. She will know soon enough."

The woman stared at him in amazement. "Yes, Monsieur could have a horse. They had one there. Not very swift, it was true, but a useful animal and strong. Should she call her husband to saddle him?"

"No," said Brandon. "Get me a lantern, and direct me to the stables. I will do the rest."

CHAPTER XVIII.

WHAT A GOOD MAN YOU ARE!

LEAGUE after league Brandon rode in the cold, damp, autumn night. The old woman had directed him as well as she was able, and he spurred his horse on at full gallop, determined not to spare him, as he could be left at some hostelry and a fresh animal procured for the ride back.

Of his own fatigue he thought nothing. That long campaign had taught him fortitude and endurance. Besides, in the un-

selfish service he had undertaken, he would never have dreamt of considering his own comfort or inclination.

His mind was full of troubled thoughts, but the image of Corinna was ever uppermost. She lay shrined in his heart like some saint. His very love now seemed to hold more of adoration and reverence than that baser alloy of human passion which once had rent his heart with anguish and vain longing.

"To love like that — to forgive like that!" he muttered again and again, and he wondered what there was in Loris Fedoroff that could have won and held a devotion so absolute, a self-surrender so divine.

That night had shown him the utter hopelessness of his own love. To a woman like Corinna freedom would mean nothing

Not even now she was free, would she choose to hide her despoiled honour under the shelter of a husband's name, and he would have no more dared to breathe such a suggestion in her ear, than he would have polluted the innocent mind of a child. She was sacred to him in this widowhood of love—as sacred as ever she had been by right of her lofty, stainless nature. To a woman who could love as she loved, the very offer of another's passion must seem a sort of insult. Fidelity had but one meaning to her.

Thinking such thoughts as these, he forgot all sense of weariness. He reached his destination in the first dull gleam of dawn. His horse was exhausted. He himself was splashed with mud, and wet with mist and rain, and chilled to the bone by the cold winds that swept over

the river and across the shelterless roads. He cared, or thought of none of these discomforts.

The doctor was at home—an old man with a kindly face, who was roused from his slumbers to see this strange, imperative messenger. He heard the case, and ordered his horses to be put to immediately, and bade his servants light a fire and prepare hot coffee for the worn-out man, and then hurried off to make his toilet.

The drive back seemed endless to Brandon. He was too restless and too utterly tired for sleep, though he lay back with closed eyes as an excuse for silencing the old man's garrulous tongue. The lady of the Château D'Avisgnes was a great mystery, and the doctor would fain have collected all possible information about

her. But he could learn nothing from the grave Englishman, who was her friend, and had to content himself with the curt replies vouchsafed.

At last the château was reached. They left the carriage at the entrance gates, for Brandon feared that the sound of wheels might disturb Corinna.

He had no need to take that precaution. Old Babette admitted them, and not staying to question her, Brandon hurried up the stairs, followed by the doctor.

On entering the room he saw the poor young mother pacing up and down, holding the child in her arms. A low, wailing noise came incessantly from the little creature's lips.

Corinna turned as they entered. She wore a long, white woollen gown, bordered with dark fur. Her lovely hair hung

round her, tossed loosely back from the white brow. Her face was deathly pale, set in an agony of fear, the like of which Brandon had never seen.

The doctor took the child from her arms, and her feverish eyes sought his face in dumb entreaty. "Is he very ill?" she cried, piteously.

The old man murmured something soothingly, but he looked up, and his eyes met Brandon's. Their language was significant.

"He is in a high fever. You had better lay him in his bed," he said aloud to Corinna. "Yes, he is very ill. Still——"

He murmured some soothing platitudes. She never seemed to hear them. She looked as if turned to stone. The doctor gave some directions, left some medicine which he had brought, and then took his

leave, promising to call in the evening again.

"It is the same fever which has broken out in the village below," he said, gravely. "The mists, the chill, this dreary, air-bound weather causes it."

"But he will recover?—give me some hope!" implored Corinna, following him to the door. "You don't think he will—die?"

"There is always more or less danger in these cases," answered the old man, guardedly, "and the child seems naturally delicate. But, of course, one can never tell. I wish I had seen him before."

To Brandon, who followed him out, he said briefly, "It is quite hopeless; break it to her as best you can."

Brandon went back. Corinna had thrown herself by the bed. Her great

burning eyes never left the child's face. He moved restlessly to and fro, and the dark fever-ridge was more plainly evident round the small red mouth. That low, monotonous wailing still went on. Corinna shivered as she heard it. "It is like a knife in my heart," she moaned, looking up at Brandon. "Oh! has God no mercy? Must I suffer this too?"

He could not speak. He felt choked. A sob rose in his throat. Strong man as he was, he could not look on this scene unmoved. He would have left the room, but she caught his hand and stayed him.

"Don't leave me," she implored. "I am not as strong as I was. Tell me you think he will get better."

"It must be as God wills," murmured Brandon.

He felt a hypocrite—he thought how hollow that trite saying sounded. But he could not meet those dark despairing eyes and tell her the truth.

She rose and changed the bandages on the child's head, and held to his burning lips the cool draught the doctor had left. That seemed to quiet him. The restless moaning ceased.

"He is better," she said. "If he could only sleep I am sure he would get well."

Presently she turned to Brandon again.

"You went for the doctor—you rode all those miles—and you were so fatigued; how can I thank you? What a good man you are!"

"It was nothing," said Brandon, coldly. "As for thanks, I never need thanks for what I do for you. Surely you don't need me to repeat that."

Her head drooped. She went towards him and raised his hand to her lips. Their light touch thrilled him like a lightning shock. He snatched it away.

"Don't," he said, almost fiercely, and turned aside, and went over to the window, his pulses beating like hammers, his brain whirling dizzily—the scene on which he gazed all one blurred, indistinct mass before his eyes.

She looked at him surprised. "Don't be angry," she said gently; "I did not mean to offend you."

He could not answer. He felt he had no strength. He left the room abruptly.

END OF VOL. II.

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